

DIARY OF AN 8-BIT WARRIOR

SHADOW OVER AETHERIA



AN UNOFFICIAL
MINECRAFT ADVENTURE

CUBE KID

ILLUSTRATED BY SABOTEN

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• CUBE KID •

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Illustrations
by Saboten



Andrews McMeel
PUBLISHING®

In memory of Lola Salines (1986–2015),
founder of 404 éditions and editor of this series,
who lost her life in the November 2015 attacks on Paris.
Thank you for believing in me.

—Cube Kid

PREVIOUS BOOKS . . .

SUMMARIZED BY RUNT!



Book One

That was my Noob period. At school, we were told that the top five students could become apprentice warriors. My dream! With my friend, Stump, we gave it our all to improve our skills in mining, combat, trading, architecture, crafting, and farming. I also met Steve and Mike, heroes from another world. Our village is often attacked by monsters. That's because Herobrine ("The Eyeless One") is back . . . If there's a school for evil sorcerers, he must have finished top of his class!



Book Two

I met a lot of friends in this second book! First, Max, who's really super smart. Then Breeze, a weird, shy student who turned out to be the strongest of us all (level 98!). And I also met Emerald, a popular girl I didn't like at all at first . . . We all fought a horrible monster, Urkk Doomwhip, who attacked our village. How scary!



Book Three

I made friends with Emerald, who left Team Pebble to join Team Runt (I'd rather not talk about Pebble; he doesn't deserve it . . . and in book four, he even tries to kill me!). Some humans arrived in the village: the Lost Legion, led by Kolbert. They wanted to fight Herobrine, but he wasn't there! But . . . then he arrived, too! LEAVE VILLAGETOWN ALONE!!! Then Notch, the great wizard who created Minecraft, made his way into our village too, and he began the battle against Herobrine. War is declared!



Book Four

Steve and Mike are off to raise an army . . . we're going to need some help! As for me, it was almost the end of the school year. There were still several tests to be taken, including a redstone test. Fortunately, I made friends with Lola, who's the best at redstone. What more can I say? More fighting, lots of fighting, against zombies, for example. We finished school and had to choose our Path (that means a profession). Either the Path of the Sword, to become a warrior, or the Path of the Diamond, to become a captain (a sort-of leader of warriors). Tough choice! I chose the Path of the Diamond, of course!



Book Five

I'm a captain, and so is Breeze (did I mention she's got magic in her? Mega cool). In this book, I successfully completed my first quest at the Owl's Reach! It was Kolb(ert) who asked me to go. Breeze joined me there, and all the better, because we had to explore the Tomb of the Forgotten King . . . so creepy! Over there, we met up with Pebble (who's a nice guy after all) and met S, an adventurer. All together, we fought the boss of the Tomb, a sorcerer named Urf (if that rings a bell, he used to be a teacher in my village). And we won! I've completed my first quest!



Book Six

I found all my friends at Owl's Reach and we headed back to the village. Except it was attacked again, and the monsters destroyed the ice cream stand . . . Unforgivable! I've learned that Breeze is in fact an elf. How weird! Anyway, a message from the king has reached us: each village must send fifteen warriors to the capital, Aetheria, for training. Of course, Team Runt is going! If we train well, we'll surely be able to go and fight Herobrine . . . but only time will tell! (Time or book seven . . . enjoy!)

THURSDAY

That morning, I was **SO** tired, waking up felt like using **an ultimate ability**.

The only reason I managed was the sound of a door opening.

At last, I summoned all of my inner strength to use the **legendary** move known as . . .

"Open Your Eyes."

Suddenly, my eyes, imbued with **supernatural** energy from this ancient technique, opened.

What I saw first was **Emerald**.

Instead of explaining why she was in my room, or wishing me good morning—you know, something **normal** like that—she simply said:

"Mana."

It took me a second. I really was that tired.

"Mana," I finally mumbled. **"A magical energy**, invisible to most, that flows throughout Aetheria, much like the wind."

"Is that it?"

". . . Um, it also exists inside of us, in the form of **MP**, or **mana points**."

"Great." She smiled. "How about Magic skill?"

"With higher Magic skill, stronger 'magic' abilities can be learned, and said **abilities** can be used more **successfully**."

"Oom."

I gave her a funny look. "You're . . . messing with me, right?"

"**OOM** stands for *out of mana*," she said. "Whenever you use an ability, some of your MP is consumed. When you run out completely, it's called **going OOM**. At this point, you'll collapse due to extreme fatigue."

"On."

I'd never heard of that before. Or maybe I had? I sighed.

She started this last night—quizzing me on random gibberish like this.

Soon, we'll be setting out for the **Academy**, and she doesn't want us showing up looking like total novices.

Or in her words, "Listen, we happen to be going to the most **prestigious** school in **all of Aetheria**. It's not going to be easy. And if you show up not even knowing what **OOM** means, how is that going to look?"

" . . . I think I'm about to go **OOM**. just listening to you . . . "

She was right, though.

The Academy is the only remaining school in the kingdom that offers **"proper Aetherian education."** Which means being versed in everything from swordsmanship to magic use, the use of abilities and spells.

There, you can learn the basics of almost any class. The best students might even end up qualifying for a **"heroic class"** like **Holy Knight** or **Sage**, where they would receive further training. And maybe someday, these lucky few might go on to serve the kingdom as **actual heroes**.

Still, it's said that for every three who register, two end up dropping out . . .

Emerald's so **worked up** about it, she's been compiling info in her own journal. I'll share one of her journal entries on the following page.







LORICA ACADEMY

OTHER NAMES: GREATER AETHERIAN
ACADEMY

LOCATION: THE CAPITAL
LANTERN DISTRICT

MOTTO: *POTENTIA LUDUS*



CLASSES	CAMPUS	SYMBOL
 SWORDPLAY I-III	SWORD HALL MARTIAL STUDIES	 SILVER PHOENIX
 INTRODUCTION TO SPELLS COVERS ALL SIX ELEMENTS, FROM FIRE TO WATER	??? HALL SPELLS	
 TRAVERSAL MOVEMENT-RELATED ABILITIES	LYRE HALL ARTS	
 FINANCES FOR ADVENTURERS	ARTISANS VILLA CRAFT	
 REDSTONE ENGINEERING	TRAINING GROUNDS LIBRARY ALCHEMY LAB GARDENS TEMPLE OF LIGHT ARENA	

Fire Spells. Water Spells. Redstone Engineering. It seems so complicated.

One spell I heard about is called **Telekinesis**. It lets you move things using only **your mind**. Obviously, a little spell like that would come in **handy** in so many different situations.

For one, I'd be able to **clean my room** and make my bed just by thinking about it.

I could also **make pancakes levitate** off my plate and fly directly into my mouth. One can only assume this is why ancient magicians made such a spell in the **first place**. Even thousands of years ago, wizards probably didn't like using silverware. I know I don't.



Well, Emerald heard about that spell, and I heard about it from her.

That's why I consider her such a **valuable** friend. She's always "hearing about things." Which means I don't have to. This allows me to spend more time on other, more important activities. Like sleeping in.

However, she *can* be **annoying** from time to time:

“Wow. Are you really trying to go back to sleep? You have a big day ahead of you. You still need to *pack your inventory, repair all your gear . . .*”

“I can do all that tomorrow,” I said.

“No, you can’t. I was told to inform you that we’ll be setting out tomorrow at first light.”

“What?” I thought we were leaving the day after?”

“Guess they felt we could use the extra day,” she said. “Classes are on the 3rd of **Diamondstar**, if you recall. And it’s a long ride from here to there.”

“Yeah, **all right.**”

With that, I finally **crawled** out of bed. And I mean **crawled**. Like the way an iron slime would probably crawl out of a bed—if they used beds, I mean—a kind of slithering or oozing.

That was around the time **Stump** barged in. And immediately started going on about the capital.

“So there’s supposedly this **mysterious shop**,” he gushed, “that’s unlike any shop out there because it doesn’t have any doors. You have to find the shop’s **secret** entrance, which is an illusionary door, I guess, which maybe requires you to speak a password, or maybe you just need to press a certain section of the wall or move something. I’m not sure, and also it changes constantly so you can’t

just watch someone else do it and copy them. No, you have to find a new **secret door** of your own . . . !!"

"Why would a shop do that?" I asked. "Wouldn't that . . . limit potential customers?"

"I think that's the point," Emerald said. "You'd need to be really **skilled** to find an entrance. So it's a shop that only caters to the pros with real money."

"Hurr. Not a bad idea, actually."

Breeze tapped me on the shoulder.

"Boo."

Wait, what?

She wasn't there a second ago.

I didn't even see her enter the room. She'd likely used that ability of hers that turns her **invisible**, then crept into my room.

"You really have to stop doing that," I said flatly.

"We need all the practice we can get, **don't we?**" The elf said with a shrug.

Before I could reply, Stump started rambling again. "Oh, and there's this **expensive** inn near the Academy that has the **fanciest** dining hall in the world! There, your meal isn't cooked in the kitchen. It's seared right at your table!" He paused, looking around for **dramatic** effect.

"With low level fire spells!"

"...?!"

I almost couldn't **believe** what he was saying. *Food cooked with ... fire magic ... ?*

(????!??????!!?????#)



*(That's my face with a thought bubble full of question marks and exclamation points, and a # symbol. I have no idea what that symbol is called, but here I'm using it to represent a waffle. To indicate **extreme** confusion.)*

I'd read my share of fairy tales **over the years**, but never had any of them mentioned cooking with actual magic.

"Almost makes you **wish** we were leaving tonight, huh?"

It was **Max** who said this. He'd entered moments ago, near the end of Stump's ramblings, along with Ophelia and Lola. Now our whole "party" was here, **all seven of us.**



Lola was **beaming.**

"I suppose searing steak with **magical fire** would be faster than traditional methods," she said. "Although, one must wonder how well one can cook using spells? Why, I imagine there'd be a risk of charring a meal to a crisp."

"Also, what happens if the spell somehow hits the table?" Ophelia asked. "Almost sounds **dangerous.**"



"I bet the tables are made of stone or even obsidian," Stump said, and his eyes grew **wider**. "Or what if they're *enchanted with fire resistance*?"

Max shrugged.

"I'm sure **it's safe**. From what I've read, an experienced caster can control their spells adequately enough. Also, such magical preparation is said to add a very unique and delicious flavor, while . . ."

Emerald **sighed** hungrily.



"All right, **that's** it. Can we get breakfast now?"

And we did get breakfast, at our favorite inn—**Snarks'**, newly renovated. We were supposed to meet up with more than a few familiar faces there. A kind of reunion, I guess.

And as we took off through the streets, I was reminded that, as amazing as the capital sounds . . . the village we were leaving was just as great.

It was **hard** to say goodbye.

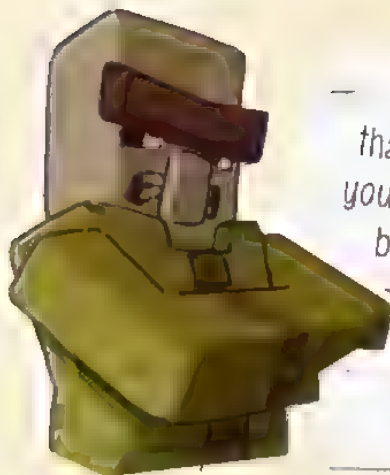


— "I've prepared you as well as I could. Good luck, and keep an eye on Breeze, will you? The minions of the Eyeless One are everywhere."



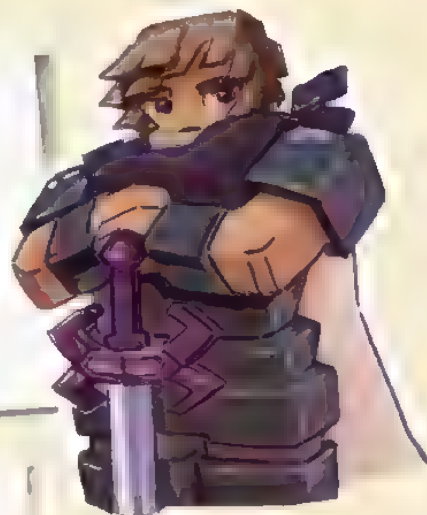
Brio

— "I have a feeling that someday, when you return . . . you'll be training me."



Perce

— "I'll see you in the capital in a few weeks. Stay safe until then, and promise me you won't leave the city, huh? There are reports of monsters north of the capital. Dangerous ones."



Kolbert

— "The other knights are staying here to help rebuild, but I'll be riding with you. Be at the village hall tomorrow before the roosters crow dawn."



Elric

Frez



"Really wish I could go with you, Runt. And don't worry, I'll help watch over the village while you're gone. And, hey . . . once you get established, you'd better send for me. I'm sure you can find a use for someone with my specific skills."



"The mayor? He'll be fine!
He's recovering now, in fact! Now
go, make our village proud! And
do try to look happier! It's the
start of an all new adventure!"

There were a lot of conversations like that.

And it was here I learned about **Cog** and his friends. **Pebble** and all the rest. They were heading to the Academy as well, all eight of them, and they all set out early this morning. **On their own.** I'm not surprised at all. They're known as the "**village misfits**" for a reason. **A rotten crew.**

Anyway, even though I was able to see everyone before I left, I still had one more **farewell** to make.

A place not too far from the inn.

Soon, we stood before a large and simple building. **Our old school.**

"I remember when we **helped build this place,**" I said. "It feels so long ago, **doesn't it?**"

"You could barely carry a fence post," Stump said.

"Yet you could already lift a slab."

Max tipped his new **hat** at the school, and we all fell silent, recalling simpler days. Here, we had brewed our first potions together, pushed our skills into the triple digits, and struggled to learn so much.

An exciting time, I remember . . .

Lola gave a small bow of respect.

O great village school,
thank you for all we have learned . . ."

- "See ya,
Villagetown.
You've been so
good to me."



FRIDAY



A day of traveling.
A night spent under the stars.

We talked about them for a while. **The stars**, I mean. Lately, most have taken on a more **greenish** hue. Which is completely normal. In Aetheria, the stars turn an almost emerald green in the winter months. Today's the twenty-seventh of **Frost Harvest**, and it's already getting cold. The end of next month, **Diamondstar**, is when we often see the first few pixels of snow.

Thankfully, the bedrolls the village sent us off with have a low-level **warmth enchantment**. Ophelia and Lola were already trying theirs out, tired from a long day on the road.

Regarding Cog and company . . .

Elric thinks they'll be all right. He's seen no signs of monster activity, and the village scouts haven't seen any in days. The central part of the kingdom is mostly safe as well, as is the west.

"So any idea what happens after we **graduate?**" Max asked. "I understand some students might get picked up by the **Knights of Aetheria**. But what if we aren't meant for that?"

"There's no real way of knowing," the knight said. "Upon graduation, each of you will have a short meeting with the king, or one of his advisors, and you will be assigned work somewhere.

What I can say is, given your age, you will almost certainly be placed in a guild, where you'll receive further training in an apprenticeship. The minions of **the Eyeless One** are still causing a lot of problems north of the capital. The kingdom's guilds need all the help they can get. In times like this, they could always use more blacksmiths and alchemists."

"I've been wanting to **join a guild** anyway," Breeze said, "so that's fine by me."

"I'll do whatever the kingdom asks of me," Stump said. "As long as I get some sort of **warrior** training."

"I think you'd have better luck becoming a **mage** like Max," Emerald said. "I heard they have a spell that can **conjure food**."

My best friend sighed at her.

"At least I have a chance of graduating. Knowing you, you'll get a bit of mud on your uniform and **drop out** the first day."

"Whatever you say, **air crafter**."

"**Dirt brewer**."

"**Slime baker**."

"**Water builder**."

In the end, though, the two just grinned.

I smiled, too. I was so glad they were here.

With them around,
it almost felt as though
we had never left home.

SATURDAY



In three days, we should arrive in **Dawnsbloom**. The westernmost province where the capital resides. Only there will we see anything resembling **real civilization**. And yes, Elric gave me **a new map**. It's fancier than my old one. Note the sea west of the capital. My old map didn't have that. Nor did it have that **seal** in the corner . . .

"That's the seal of the **Cartographer's Guild**," Elric said, as we went over the map at camp. "Only a map with this seal can be trusted as **accurate**."

So a map can be **inaccurate**.

Not once had the thought ever crossed my mind.

Before, someone could have drawn a potato onto a piece of paper, told me it was a map of the kingdom, and I probably would have believed it.

I don't have too much else to write about. Today was a **blur**.

There are only so many grass blocks you can ride past before your mind goes numb and you begin questioning **YOUR OWN SANITY**.



Grass blocks . . .
Endless grass
blocks . . .

SUNDAY

I bring yet more news of our **heroic adventure**:

Emerald grumbled all day. Mostly about the weather. It's been raining off and on.

Stump soon joined in, going on about that **secret shop**. If he can't find a hidden entrance, he vowed, he's going to take a pickaxe and mine through one of the walls.

He then leaned over and whispered to me. He was almost out of his "travel rations." **Muffins. Scones**. Rolls. Stuff his parents sent with him.

I'll admit, I'm partially responsible for this **shortage**, so I began rummaging through my own saddlebag to see what I had left—and **I felt a sudden panic**.

Although I did find plenty of turnips, beetroots, and loaves of bread . . .

. . . There was no food.

We'll have to **tighten our belts**, then, and ration the rest of my friend's stash. He doesn't have much left. Only fifteen scones, ten cupcakes and twenty-six cinnamon rolls.

This meager hoard must last us another **two whole days** until we reach **somewhere** we can find more food.

It's going to be close. We may have to go without food for an hour or two. And some of the rolls are already getting kind of dried out. Hey, it's not really an adventure without at least a few hardships, **right?**

MONDAY



We saw **a monster** today. **A blue slime.**

Breeze spotted it after we had all stopped for a short rest.

It was small compared to a full-sized green slime. A bit smaller than a block.

"It's been a while since I've seen one," Breeze said.

And as we watched, it **disappeared** into a small hole.

According to Breeze, **blue slimes** burrow through dirt blocks.

Their tunnels lead to underground nests called **slimeholes**.

Hearing that, I was snocked, of course. A slime that can dig through the ground? **That's just wild.** Still, that doesn't compare to what the elf said next.

"Did you know blue slimes are actually quite **edible**?"

Wuuuuh?

Okay, did she just say . . .

Blue slimes . . . a type of monster . . . can be . . .

Of all the things I imagined I'd be learning out here, this had not been one of them.

Breeze smiled understandingly.

"It's strange, but true. The elven rangers of old used to make blue slime jerky. **Stew** as well, I believe."

You can imagine my expression.

" . . . But y-you don't, r-right?"

"No, that was a long time ago. And it began out of necessity due to being in the wild for long periods, where food could be scarce."

I let out a small sigh of **relief**. And as we headed back to the others, I checked my horse's saddlebags. I'd already checked earlier, and knew I still had more than enough travel rations. *(Just not cool ones, like cupcakes and rolls.)*

Still, it's always **good practice** to confirm such things.

CRAFTSDAY (TUESDAY)



Dawnsbloom.

The most populated of Ardenvell's many provinces.

Here they use **different names** for the days of the week. I'll start using them now.

Emerald is still quizzing me on random **gibberish**, by the way.

When we stopped for a rest earlier, she came up to me and said, "**Aggro.**"

"I know what aggro is."

"Maybe you can use it in a sentence, then."

"Fine."

I gave her an irritated look.

"You're aggroing me right now."

CRAFTSDAY (TUESDAY) UPDATE 11

I noticed something **weird**.

Every farmer we've seen today was **human**. I asked Elric about it after we made camp.

The knight's face grew **rather serious**.

"There's . . . something I've been meaning to tell you. Although we call ourselves villagers, we were once known as the **highborn**."

What he said next was like something out of a **fairy tale**.

In ancient times, our ancestors possessed great magical **knowledge**. But that knowledge was used by **the Eyeless One** during the war ages ago, allowing him the use of dark magics, and giving him command of things like **airships** and **war golems**.

After the war ended, the rest of the world wasn't too nappy with us. The king of that time eventually **banished** our kind from Dawnsbloom, sending us into the hinterlands. So we left, settling down in places like Villagetown, where we lived from then on as simple farmers, vowing to never use magic ever again.

A sad story.

It certainly explained a lot.

I'd often wondered why we lived in the middle of **nowhere** . . .

"It is indeed **a tragic tale**," the knight said. "At any rate, this is why you won't find too many of our kind in a city like the capital."

. . .

To think villagers were once **powerful wizards**.

And now, if you visit a place like Villagetown, you'll find we use simple blocks of wood for tables and chairs. Sometimes, you might even come across an improperly placed door that doesn't open right . . .

Shameful . . .

CRAFTSDAY (TUESDAY) UPDATE III

*We reached the land of Dawnsbloom,
It's full of lovely farms,
And soon we saw a farmer,
Who smiled with open arms,
He offered us some porridge,
I said it tastes like chalk,
So Stump offered me a half-eaten roll,
I'd rather eat a grass block.*

That's something Emerald sang tonight.

A summary of our day. And an attempt to raise her **Music** skill.

As if **constant rain** and endless grass blocks weren't enough.

Now I have to suffer through this.

Will this journey ever end?

KINGSDAY (WEDNESDAY)

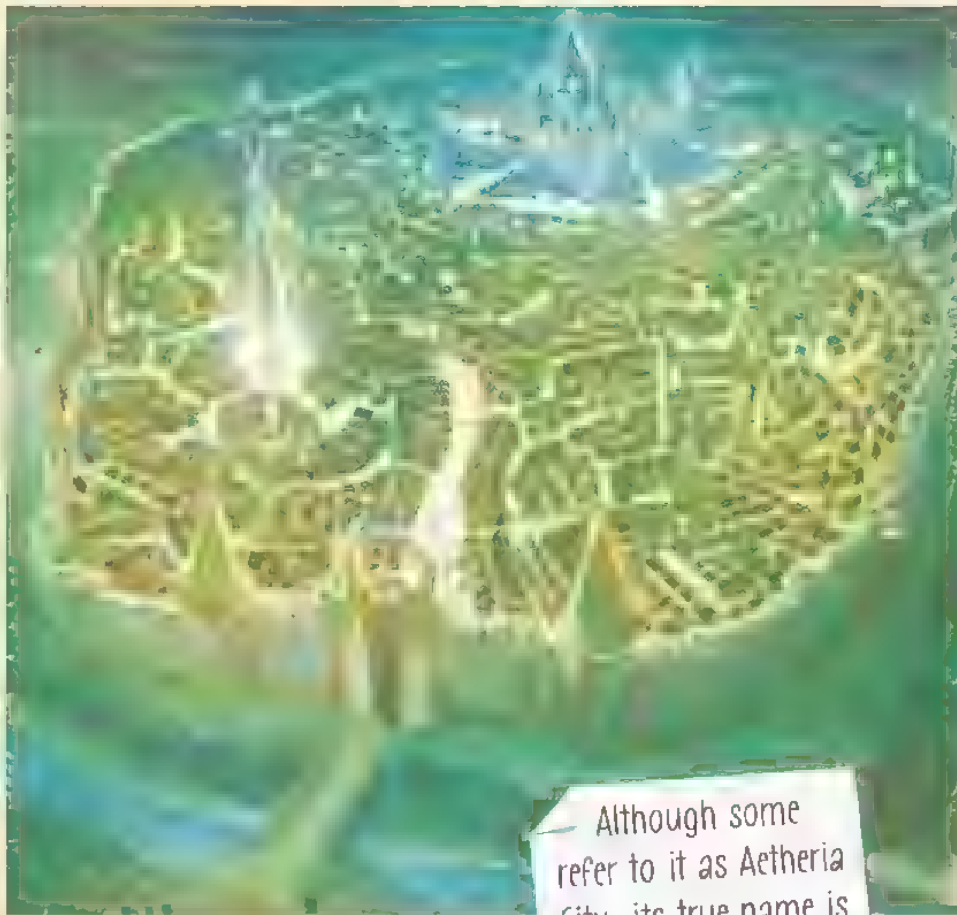


As the capital came into view, I opened my mouth to voice my thoughts in an eloquent manner:

.....

 # . .### . .## . #####
 . . . ##### . .!!"

The first time you ever see a **city like this**, that's all you can really say. That wall must have been three **times the height** of Villagetown's wall—and that moat, the statues, the banners, the gate, everything, **it was just . . .** I'm actually wiping away tears just thinking about it . . .



Although some refer to it as Aetheria City, its true name is Loric.

"Among mages," Max said, "it's known as **the City of Elements**. Because mana concentrates in this area for some reason. No one knows why, but some theorize it may be why the capital was originally built here. The way cities are often built **near rivers**."

Emerald sighed.

"As much as I'd like to listen to **a treatise** on mana and why it flows, I think there's currently a much better use for that **brilliant egg** of yours."

The mage raised an eyebrow. "Such as?"

"Such as figuring out what we're going to order for dinner **for example!**"

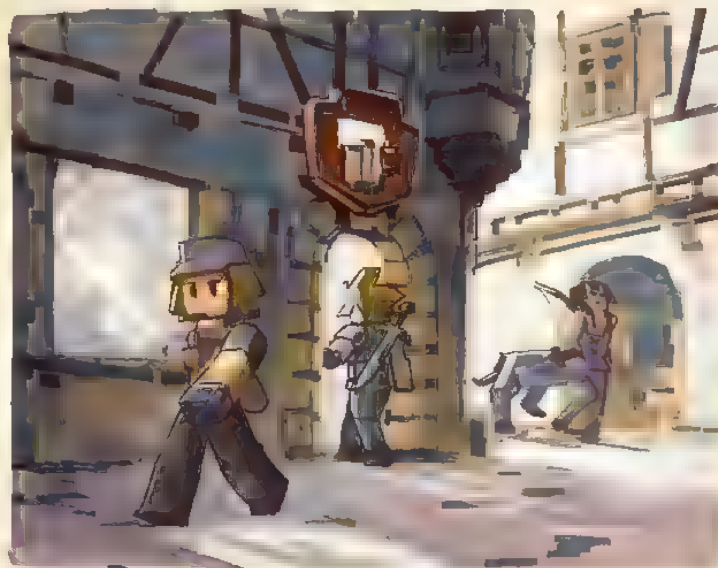
But as we rode through the gate, my friends fell **silent** again, and I grew even more speechless.

Up ahead was a street **absolutely** bursting with people. On either side, half-timber shops towered **majestically**, all white and brown with red tile roofs, and adorned with colorful signs.

Soon, the air was filled with the scent of freshly baked bread, the beautiful notes of a lute, laughs and shouts and the calls of street vendors selling their wares.

We rode past armor and weapon shops, bakeries, temples, and countless market stalls with crates full of unusual looking vegetables.

Needless to say, the level of construction here was unreal.
Unlike anything you'd ever find in Villagetown.





And the people . . .

At this point, elves and dwarves aren't too strange to me. Still, over here was a girl with **violet skin** and **gossamer wings**. And over there, a lizard person. **Those fangs!**

I couldn't tell if that was a smile.

Just as unusual, to me, were some of the things these people said.

"The weather's sure been nice," I heard **a dwarf** tell his friend. "But **another storm** will soon be upon us. I can feel it in me beard!"

Hearing that, I looked at Breeze.

"That's just **an expression**, right?"

"Err . . ." The elf made **a strange face**. "Do I look like I know anything about dwarves? Or beards?" Emerald rolled her eyes at me. "**No**, Runt, it's not an expression. Dwarves can actually sense things with their beards. It's a dwarven ability called **Beardsense!**"

"**You joke,**" Lola said, "but I've read that dwarves are born within the deepest caves, where they emerge from **crystal eggs**."

Ophelia frowned.

"**That's absurd**. Where do these eggs supposedly come from?"

"Why, I imagine they grow from the earth, the way mushrooms do."

Stump was glancing around anxiously, looking **annoyed** at the same time. "Can you guys please stop talking about dwarves and help me look for **secret shops???**"

By the way, **I'd love** to give you a proper tour of the city, but that will have to wait, because Elric took us straight to the Academy's **livery stables**.

As much as I wanted to explore the city, I didn't complain. I was so glad to stable my horse and walk around using the **heroic** technique known as . . .

"Move Legs."

Oh, the capital has this **weird** law regarding mounts.

You can't ride in the central sections of the city.

Weird, right? So different from my village.

In Villagetown, you could ride a horse backward through the front door of your house, while wearing a purple and yellow toga, and no one would say a word.

Well, someone might ask where you got the toga, but that's about it . . .



“Even now, it
feels like a dream.”

— "To think someone
like me would ever
get to go to a school
like this . . ."



"Welcome!
Are you here to
register?"



KINGSDAY (WEDNESDAY) UPDATE II



As part of the Academy's **registration process**, we had to speak with one of the advisors at the front desk.

They're called "**questmasters**." They're supposed to be **magicians** of some kind, but in their red blazers, they look more like office workers. The one who interviewed me was a young lady named **Aery**.

She took me to her rather large office where she asked a few questions. Mostly about my hometown. She also had this bejeweled, **mirrorlike object** that she claimed would display my **"status,"** or stats like HP, MP, skills, abilities, and so on.

It's called a **"status stone."** It's almost like those record books we used back in Villagetown.

Remember those? The books that displayed our skills? A status stone can be thought of as the **upgraded version** of that.

While studying me with this device, Aery wrote a lot of numbers down on this fancy sheet. It looked like a form, but I couldn't read it. Besides the words **"Character Sheet"** at the very top, everything was in some weird **runic** language.

The mirror screen was the same. Yet the advisor read it effortlessly.

"Let's see, your Magic skill is currently at 1." She smiled. **"That's very low, but it's nothing you can't change with a little practice."**

"How about my MP?"

"3," she said. **"Also pretty low. But I wouldn't sweat it. If your Magic skill and MP are higher than zero, it means you have at least some magical ability. You just need training."**

She touched the **mirror** object, accessing more information.

"Also, you have seven other skills in the 100s. It's really not bad for someone your age and . . ."

She **trailed off**, staring at the screen for a moment, then adjusted her glasses.

"It says you've **taken on a quest?** Is that right?"

". . . Yeah?"

I told her about **my first real adventure** in Owl's Reach. The time Breeze and I went on our very first quest. The first time either of us had ever set foot in a dungeon.

As I shared this story, Aery listened intently, asking for more details and jotting things down onto the **"character sheet."**

"At any rate, showing up here to register can be thought of as another quest. You did travel quite some ways. Please take **your reward**. A little something to get you started."

What fell onto the desk were **coins**. Gold and silver.



"These are **drakken**," she said. "A silver is worth one emerald, while a gold is worth ten. The kingdom's **standard** currency. Most shops around here will still take emeralds, though."

The coins she gave me were worth **1,000 emeralds**. And I still had the approximately **3,782 emeralds** in my inventory. My haul from that last adventure.

In short, I was **absolutely** rolling compared to just three months ago, back when my inventory had only a single carrot. I shudder to think of those times.

Total noobery.



"Well, that's about it,"
Aery said.

She gave me a fancy
looking **pendant**. A small
emerald encased in silver, with a
silver chain.

"This is the **insignia of a first rank
cadet**. Starting out, your lessons will be fairly basic. You'll receive
more specialized training once you advance to second rank."

... So I'm in?"

She nodded.

"Welcome aboard!"

And just like that, I, Runt of Villagetown, **humble villager**,
became a student at the best school in all of Aetheria.

When I saw my friends again, they were **all** wearing
pendants as well.

Stump was almost **in tears** when he ran up and gave me the
biggest hug, and he all but shouted about how we made it, and how
he was going to become **a warrior, a real** one, and how he'd
learn all kinds of defensive moves, until he advanced to **knight**,

where he'd go on all kinds of quests, and mine stone blocks with his bare hands, and discover **secret shops**, and, and . . .

Emerald made a face. "If I hear another word about secret shops," she said, "I swear, the first spell I'm going to learn is a spell called **Silence**."

We also have the **same lessons** for now.

ABILITIES I

The very basics of magic use.

TRAVERSAL I

Running, jumping, climbing, crawling
and otherwise moving around.

WORLD STUDIES

Aetherian history and geography.

MONSTER STUDIES

The anatomy and psychology of common monsters.

SWORDPLAY II

A step up from Swordplay I. Since we already
received training in this area back home.

Basic stuff, really.

As Aery said, once we attain second rank, our classes will get more **interesting**. Advanced sword techniques. Summoning magic.

I can't wait.

We had to pick up **our uniforms** next.

Aery took us to get them at the item shop near the front lobby.

Yeah, the Academy has its own item shop.

Well?

How do we look?

A bit flashy, I suppose.

Especially the feathered hats.



"Academy issue
arming sword."



The uniform's jacket is a kind of padded armor called **"gambeson."** Layers of quilted cloth.

We were also given new swords. They're called **"arming swords."** It's a new type Loric's blacksmiths came up with recently. When I held mine, I noted how light it felt compared to my other weapons. Almost too light. **Even flimsy.**

It's what we're supposed to use, though, in the Academy's training grounds. They want everyone using the same gear during **"practical training."**

Aery said we'll be getting even more stuff later on. Cartography kits. Backpacks. Belt pouches. Rope.

The shop had a lot of this stuff lying around. As well as enchanted torches, lockpicks, iron spikes, waterproof paper, chisels, wooden poles three meters in length, pickaxes, compasses, hacksaws, and these giant fishhook looking things—**grappling** hooks.

Weird, right?

Not exactly the kind of gear I was expecting.

What kind of school provides stuff like that? Shouldn't we at least be getting basic **wands** or something?

"On, I suppose I should show you **the quest board**," Aery said. "It's right across the hall. Once you attain second rank, you'll be able to take on any quest offered here. One quest per week. You can think of it as **homework**."

Quests?

As homework?

Words I loved to hear.

What was a quest board, though?

Quest board . . . A curious combination of words.

And as my friends and I followed Aery across the hall, here is where **my life changed irrevocably** . . .

KINGSDAY (WEDNESDAY) —UPDATE III



At first glance, it seemed like any normal bulletin board.

Yet as I moved closer, I saw the papers it held. Of varying sizes and colors, they all had intricate borders, blocks of text in fanciful handwriting, and old-fashioned illustrations.

... And each of these papers appeared to describe a quest.

One was a quest to **hunt pink slimes**. They're little more than pests. Another required **exploring ancient ruins** to the south of the capital.

My heart soared as I scanned the countless sheets of light brown vellum.

Gathering rare magical flowers used in alchemy. Translating ancient languages. Crafting magical wands. Repairing redstone steam golems. Delivering supplies to villages in need. Ridding farms of giant bats, arachnids, and other low-level pests.

"Wow . . ."

I **staggered** a bit.

It was, without a doubt, the most amazing thing I'd ever seen.

A seemingly endless amount of adventures, all right there, within my grasp, on an elegantly polished board.

Even Emerald seemed excited. **"This is just . . . Well, I never thought the Academy would have something like this!"**

Breeze nodded. "Brio once mentioned these boards, but he said only **the guilds** had them. That's why I wanted to join one."

Lola had a wistful look as she clasped her hands together. "Oh, the thought of being able to work with redstone golems. It's **a dream come true!**"

Max was silently staring at the board. At the **"translation quests"** in particular. As well as those involving **the knowledge of magic** and ancient history and the creation of scrolls and other basic magical items.

"Hmm . . . This slime quest is exactly like the one I took on in Owl's Reach," Ophelia said. **"Pays better, though."**

Emerald had a thoughtful look. "So this is like a . . . **system**. A way to organize questing in general."

Aery nodded. "We've had **a lot of trouble** with youngsters flooding into the capital lately. Farmkids with nothing but their grandfather's rusty sword and breastplate. They would immediately take on quests completely unprepared. Some would **never return**. So recently, the royal council decided to **regulate** questing throughout the kingdom. Currently, in Dawnsbloom, you need to be a registered member of a guild to accept quests. However, the ones offered here are very safe. It's really just **a kind of training.**"

"So to go on quests here, there's no guild membership required?" Stump asked. "We only need to hit **second rank?**"

Aery nodded. "And when you do, I'll be here **to advise** you. As a **questmaster**, it's my duty to ensure you're prepared for any and all quests you take on in the future."

Quest boards . . .

For the rest of the day, it was all I could think about.

When we stepped into the Academy's dining hall, I barely noticed how **beautiful it was**.



I can't remember what we had for dinner.

These fried potato pie things? They were **so delicious**, I think. Otherworldly. Yet I ate them the way an iron golem would.
No real emotion.

Even when **Cog** approached our table, I paid him no mind.
Yeah, **that's right.**

Cog and all his friends made it here, **safe and sound.**

When they tried talking to us, though, I barely noticed. I was having a conversation with Stump.

" . . . And maybe there will be a quest," Stump said blankly, staring ahead in an absent way, "where we have to go in a volcano and defeat **a fire lord . . .**"

" . . . What's a fire lord?" I murmured, completely lost in thought.

" . . . A kind of **giant fire elemental** guy, I think . . ."

" . . . **So cool . . .** And maybe one where we have to travel under the ocean," I said, "to an **underwater kingdom . . .**"

Stump nodded absently. " . . . Where we have to speak with **mermaids** and help them reclaim a lost artifact from an ancient sunken shrine . . ."

" . . . Mermaids . . ."

" . . . I hear they eat magical seaweed . . ."

" . . . Magical seaweed . . . I want to eat magical seaweed . . ."

Cog gave us **the strangest** look.

"You two are **just as weird** as always, I see. Take care, bat farmers."

Even when Elric showed up again, and told us he was taking off to report in at his guildhall, I gave almost **no reaction**.

"I'll check up on you in a few days," the Knight of Aetheria said.
"Take care."

I nodded absently.

"See you soon, quest board . . ."

...

My new room, shared with Max and Stump, similarly drew **no real response**.

It's a **cozy** room, with three comfortable looking beds and a table with three chairs, all of marvelous, **wondrous** craftsmanship.

Seeing a room like that, I should have been bouncing around like a green slime that just chugged a Swiftness potion.

Yet . . .



Quest board . . .

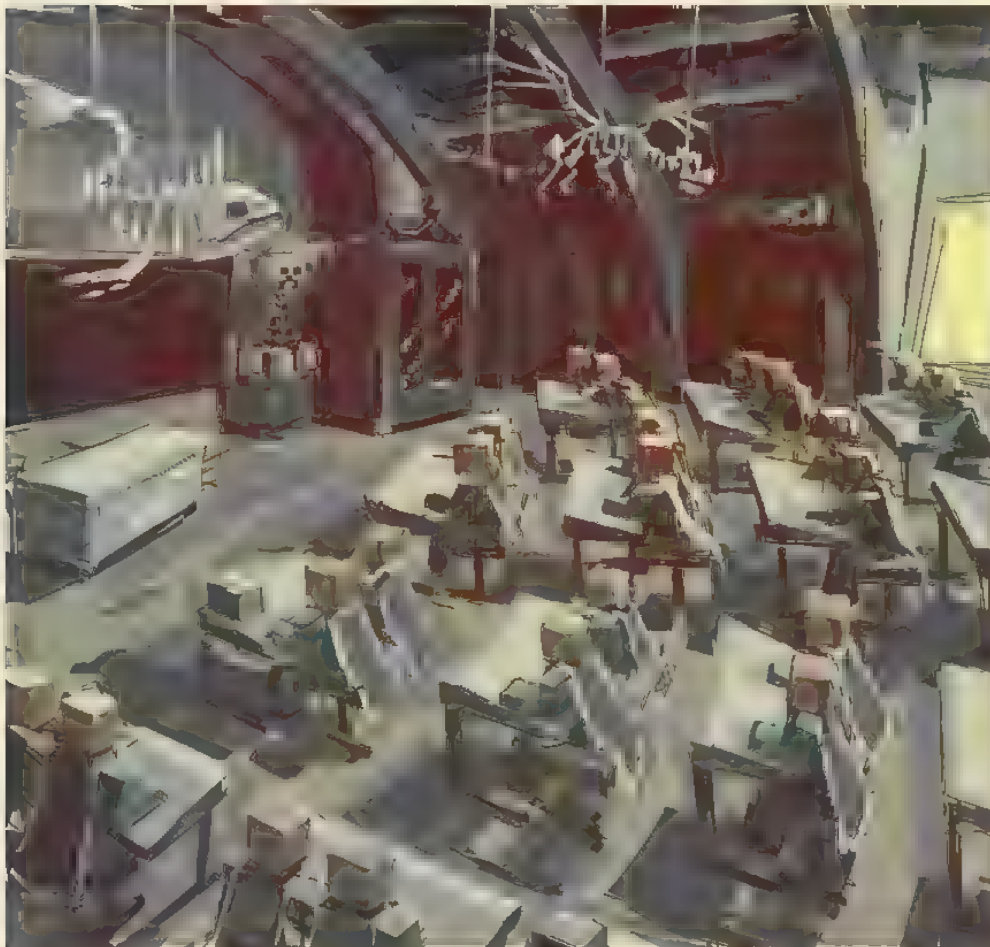
Was the only thing on my mind.

I had a hard time **falling asleep.** had to reach second rank.

I had to.

And really, how hard
could the Lorica Academy
really be?

GUILDSDAY (THURSDAY)



Abilities I.

Our **very first class.**

The teacher, **Camille**, first talked about the basics of magic use—things like **mana**, **MP**, and **Magic skill**. Easy, right? I'd already gone over this stuff with Emerald, so I had no trouble **following along.**

The teacher then went on to mention how spells are just a **subclass** of abilities that require more concentration and a bit of chanting and gesturing. She talked about several common **theories** as to how people are even able to use abilities in the first place.

This was followed by a lecture on the **six elemental schools** of magic—fire, water, earth, air, light, and shadow—including the strengths/weaknesses of each, such as . . .

Um . . .

Such as . . .

Well, she talked about this sort of thing for a while.

How long, exactly, I don't know. I only **vaguely** recall her asking us, at some point, to share any basic spells we happened to know of and called on us randomly.

I don't know why she called **on me** . . .

My hand wasn't raised . . .

"I also vaguely recall my teacher informing me that a string of Z's is not the name of any known spell."



At least our next class was more exciting.

"Traversal."

It's a class on running, jumping, climbing, crawling, and otherwise moving around.

It was held in an underground area past a flight of stairs.

Strange, it had a series of torchlit chambers reminiscent of an ancient tomb.

One chamber had tables and chairs of worn stone. Like a classroom . . . only inside of a **dungeon**. Another room had a wide hole in the floor. A shaft that led to darkness.

We had to **"traverse"** this shaft by climbing down a rope tied to nearby stone post. It was a silvery rope, supple and strong. Our instructor said it's the same stuff you'll find on most bows—**spider silk**.

Only the elves know how to craft it. Which Breeze confirmed. So I felt pretty **safe** climbing down it.

For a moment there—armed with only a sputtering torch and my Climbing skill—I almost felt like some kind of **heroic treasure hunter**.

Yeah, we were required to hold a torch during our descent. Since we only have two hands, that meant holding a torch **in our teeth**. Really, does it get any more heroic than that?

And it could be said that I descended **the fastest** among all fifty students. I reached the bottom of that shaft in record time.

Once there, I made an **interesting** discovery. The floor was not stone, but water.

. . . I discovered it was water when I landed **on my face**.

But really, what kind
of magic **school** are they
running here?!

I just want to go on
a few quests! Learn a few
spells! And cool ones, like
Firebolt!

I didn't sign
up for this !!



GUILDSDAY (THURSDAY) —UPDATE II

"HrghghhghGg," I said, as I went flying through the air.

"Hhrrgrhr..."

"BwAaAaAaahghrHhhjg," was his reply before crashing into a heap beside me.

I had run into a fellow student in the hall.

. . . **It was my fault.**

My friends and I had gotten lost, we were almost late for our last class, so I suggested we all chug Swiftness potions.

"Wow . . ."

The guy I'd crashed into looked **a bit dazed**. A large guy with bright **orange hair**. Human. A few years older than me.

"Ah, what kind of **sand-crafting blockhead** runs around chugging Swiftness potions on their way to class . . . ?!"

"You know, sand crafter isn't the **best insult**," I said, as we picked ourselves up (I felt dazed myself). "You can make concrete from **sand, idiot** . . ."

"Sure thing, villager."

He glanced at my friends.

"What are you kids even doing here, **anyway?** Do you have any idea what you're getting into? I highly advise you to go back to whatever village you just **crawled** out of . . ."

With that, he shouldered me out of the way, and his friends followed, **snickering** as they passed.

"Can't believe we actually have **to train** with commoners like them," one of them said. A girl with violet hair.

As they walked away, I was about to say something, but Max grabbed my shoulder. "Trouble's **the last thing** we need right now."

Emerald nodded. "Besides, **um**, that guy's almost as big as Peoble."

"I take it they're **nobility**," Breeze said. "There's a lot of them around here."

Noble kids, huh?

That was something Elric talked about on the road. That some of the students here are from **incredibly wealthy families**.

They come from larger cities, if not Lorica itself, and have years of training prior to enrolling here. Some can probably even cast an actual spell or two. And spells are much harder than using a basic ability like **Dual Wield** or **Analyze** . . .

Ah, I almost forgot I even had that ability. **Analyze**. I squinted at the big jerk with orange hair. *Analyze* finally kicked in. A name appeared over his head:

Bayard.

In addition to his size, he gave me the impression that he could really handle himself. Probably not the kind of person you want to make enemies with on the first day.

Oh well.

At least our final class, **Swordplay**, was held in the training grounds.

We had to fight practice **dummies**. But they aren't like the ones we fight back home.

Here they **fight back**. They also happen to be golems nearly three blocks in height.

Luckily, these things are somehow enchanted with air magic to not deal any real damage. It's almost like being hit with a pillow.

A large pillow.

Very large.

Or perhaps a block of wool . . .



I collapsed into the mud long before the end of class.

Almost everyone did. The only ones still standing were **the nobles** from earlier, and Breeze, but even they looked tired.

Our instructor—a **grizzled** dwarf named Dirg—looked at us and sighed.

"Elven beards," he grumbled.

That's another dwarf expression. One of surprise, amazement, or dismay.

"This is what I have to work with. A bunch of pigeon chested, twiggly **armed neophytes** with subpar Magic skills and single digit MP! **Dirt enchanter**s, the whole lot of ya!"

"Dirt enchanter?"

Max, **on the ground next to me**, half covered in pixels of mud, turned his head to look at me.

"That isn't much of **an insult**, either" he said. "I've read that it's possible to enchant a dirt block with a variety of useful effects, many of which have applications in the fields of . . ."

"Shut up!" Emerald hissed, also still on the ground. "You really wanna do **fifty laps** right now?!"

Breeze crouched beside me.

"How are you feeling?"

"On, I don't know. Somewhere between **fermented potato** and **congealed slime**." She returned my tired grin with one of her own.

"I did **warn** you, didn't I?"

Okay, so she did mention, a while back, how difficult this school could be. Still, she never said anything about how I'd be getting pummeled by my own training dummy!

A gentle pummeling, but still!

**Isn't it supposed to be
the other way around?!**

HEARTHSDAY (FRIDAY)

"Wake up!"

My eyes **flew** open. It was Breeze.

The elf was standing over my bed. **My room.** I was in my room.

Max and Stump were in their own beds, **snoring** lightly. It was morning. What happened?

"You went oom," Breeze said.

"OOM."

Out of mana.

I thought back to the events of yesterday. Everything was **hazy**. In my head, was **a blur of angry** golems, angry golem noises, and mud. I vaguely recalled someone dragging me away before I **blacked out** completely.

It shouldn't have been that bad.

Before we fought, our instructor had tried teaching us **Parry**.

A basic **"magic sword ability."**

The same one Ophelia learned a while back.

With enough training in that, you could block even a golem's nuge fists.

There's **one problem**, though. Like Breeze once said, it takes time to become decent with even the simplest ability. Magic can't be **learned overnight**.

So when I tried Parrying, it "**fizzled**" most of the time.

Once, the ability even "backfired" on me, and my sword flew out of my hands. **It was so pathetic.** *(Luckily, everyone else was just as pathetic as me, so I didn't look too bad . . .)*

Furthermore, Parry **consumes** 1 MP, and my max MP is currently 3.

I only successfully used Parry three times before running out of mana completely.

"So every ability **costs mana**," I mumbled, crawling out of bed. "Even something like **Analyze**?"

Breeze nodded. "Analyze displays basic information about your target. This is a **magical effect**. It takes a tiny amount of mana to accomplish this."

"Huh. I guess that makes **sense**. What about Dual Wield?"

"Dual Wield makes you more ambidextrous. When used, it will **slowly consume** mana over time."

"So if I were to use Dual Wield and just attack a training dummy for an hour, I'd go **OOM** and collapse."

"Well, probably not **that long**," Breeze grinned. "Your MP is **SO low**. Not that mine is much higher. We still need to train."

Anyway, there you have it.

A **basic** explanation on how abilities work. As told by Breeze.

The Academy is trying to help us out with our mana problems. Today, the instructors supplied us with these magical cookies called "**mana biscuits**."

They restore 1 MP when eaten. They're **pretty tasty**, too.

The dining hall is also serving new food . . .

. . . I'm not too happy about that.

As of today, **everything** on the menu contains these weird, stinky vegetables called "**shrelbs**."

They're supposed to be slightly magical. Eating enough of them will eventually increase your maximum MP. But **the smell** they give off . . .

At breakfast, I stared at my plate in **despair**. A baked shrelb and potato pie. The smell emanating from the golden crust reminded me of Breeze's failed brewing attempt back in Villagetown.

You know that time her potion turned into a cloud of smoke?

They taste just as bad as they smell: **Awful!** A combination of asparagus, Brussel sprouts, and mushrooms—the slimy, rubbery kind. Although it's probably not quite as bad as **blue slime jerky**, I'm sure it's awfully close.

Today was basically a repeat of yesterday, by the way.

More studying, more memorization. We also started doing these strange **meditation** exercises.

We had to meditate on these weird sounds—like “**zu**” and “**gwa**.” They’re called “**mantras**,” and they’re said to contain magical power that will increase our Magic skill.

Yeah, **right**.

They’re the same kind of sounds Emerald’s little brother used to make back when he was an infant . . .

Finally, **Swordplay II** was just as brutal as yesterday.

It almost reminded me of these old comic books I used to read as a little kid.

The hero would beat up a bunch of random, nameless bad guys. And there’d be an illustration with these **small exploding** bubbles, containing words like “**POW!**” and “**ZONK!**” and “**BAM!**”

That’s pretty much what happened today. Except the hero was my **training dummy**.

— "Being a random,
nameless bad guy is
seriously no fun."



HYMNSDAY (SATURDAY)

"... Fgghhh."

No, that's not a spell **incantation**.

That's the sound I made in the training grounds after collapsing
face down in the mud.

ALMSDAY (SUNDAY)



I went to the **front desk** with Breeze this morning.

We wanted to check to see if **our stats** had improved at all over the past three days.

The advisor lady, Aery, took us into her office, where she studied me with that mirrorlike object again.

Her eyes lingered on the screen.

"Hmm. Unfortunately, it seems your MP is still at 3. The same as when you registered."

3 MP.

That's so **pathetic**.

Still, Breeze only has 7 MP, so maybe 3 isn't so bad?

"Most start out here with **low** MP," Aery said. "I wouldn't worry about it too much. The food we're preparing will **help**, after all. Shrelbs contain traces of magic. They're among a class of food known as '**growth food**.'"

". . . Uh huh."

Just thinking about **those vegetables** . . .

Growth food. The only thing they grow is my fear of lunch and dinner.

Aery's gaze returned to the mirror thing. "On a happier note, your Magic skill has already improved **That's great**. I assume you've been practicing the mantras."

". . . Yeah."

The advisor smiled. "I know it's **tough**, but please continue working through the **meditation** exercises. The fact that your Magic skill has improved at all in just two days speaks to **their effectiveness.**"

"How much did my Magic skill go up, anyway?"

". . . By one point. **It's currently at 2.** And I know, it doesn't sound like much. Still, compared to when you first stepped into my office, it's a **100% improvement**, right?"

"Huhhhhhggggggg."

I lowered my head. My shoulders **sagged.**

"Will I ever be able to see **my own stats?**"

You will. That does require a bit of training. More meditation and mantras. It's the same as basic spell learning, really. You'll work on it soon enough."

". . . Maybe you can let me **borrow** one of those mirror things until then."

"I'm afraid they're **reserved** for advisor staff only. But feel free to visit me any time!"

". . ."

When I left the office, my head was **still lowered.**

"We just have to keep at it," Breeze said. "I remember a time when your skill with a sword was only a few points above zero. And now it's as **high as mine.**"

"Yeah."

I thought back to the times we fought **mock zombies.** It had seemed like such a big deal at the time. I recalled cheering after one of the zombie's "arms" fell off from the lightest bit of damage. The swing of a wooden sword.

"I suppose I have come a long way, and . . . **whoa.**"

A small crowd entered the front lobby. A crowd of . . . **lizardmen.**

Aery greeted them with a **professional** smile.

"Welcome to the Lorica Academy. How may I help you?"

One of the **reptiles,** wearing only a fur loincloth, approached the front desk and, in the deepest voice, a thick accent, and a blank expression, said, "A man on a horse handed us a letter. A letter with a shiny crown. It said to come here. To the **academy.**"

Another lizardman, in blue robes adorned with feathers, and holding a gnarled staff, looked around suspiciously. "This is the academy, yes?"

"I'm sorry," Aery replied, "but it's the sixth of Diamondstar. The letter your village received strictly stated applicants would no longer be accepted past the third."

"But it said to come here," a third lizard said, dressed in furs and what looked like a creeper's leaves. "We are hungry and sleepy. We walked very, very far. We want to **help people**. Many **bad things** are everywhere. We crush bad things."

The rest of the strange group quickly approached the desk, their expressions as **blank** and **unthreatening** as the first three.

"We crush **slime** things."

"And **green slow man** things."

"And walking **bone** things."

"And **one eye big bat** things."

"Any bad thing you want to crush, **we crush it.**"

"Err . . ."

It seemed Aery's professionalism was being put to the test.

"Let me get **my supervisor**. In the meantime, **please have a seat!**"

ALMSDAY (SUNDAY)—UPDATE II

After Breeze and I left the lobby, Stump came running up to us.

"Hey! What are you guys doing still hanging around here?! **It's the weekend!** Let's go out and see the city! I've already been on an adventure!"

I gave him a tired look. "Of course, you have."

"I have! I found a **secret shop!**"

Breeze raised an eyebrow. **"A secret shop?** You mean there's . . . more than one?"

"At least three! The one I found, you don't have to find a **hidden door**. You have to jump onto the roof and go down the chimney!"

"The chimney, eh?" I asked.

I was mildly interested. I did have a ton of emeralds.

Maybe I could buy **something** nice? A new shield? I needed **a new shield**.

I already had that black armor Brio made me. And that sword Breeze gave me back in Villagetown. A shield would complete this outfit.

My adventuring gear.

Breeze shrugged at me. "Let's go have a look?"

The secret shop in question was a good ten minute jog from the Academy.

It was **cozy** looking. All stone. The kind of shop you'd imagine a dwarf to have.

... It also had **no doors**.

... **Or windows** on the first floor.

... And it was completely surrounded **by water**.

...

We climbed up some crates alongside a nearby building to get a better look.



"Don't suppose you can just use a ladder," I said.

"You can't **swim** very close," Stump said. "That guard over there will shout at you."

"We could make some **sort of scaffolding**," Breeze suggested. Stump shook his head.

"It's against the law to do any sort of construction in the city without a **Builder's Card**."

"... The guards told you that, didn't they? **You've already tried.**"

My best friend's shoulders dropped. "Yes."

I noticed he was **a bit damp**.

"I take it you've already climbed up here earlier and tried jumping across."

He nodded. "They say that's the only way you can get up there. You **have to jump.**"

"That's a pretty far jump," Breeze said. "Are people actually making that?"

"**They must be.** But I don't see how . . ."

As he said this, I heard footsteps on the roof behind us. It was **a knight in brilliant armor**, some sort of diamond mail.

"**Hey, kids,**" he said, in his deep and heroic voice. His square jaw was a block of stone covered in stubble. The epitome of "heroic knight."

"You mind moving?"

When the three of us parted, the knight ran toward the **edge** of the roof and leapt off, leaving behind **a trail of** faint green pixels. After soaring through the air impossibly far, he landed on the secret shop's roof with a thud.

"Wow . . ."

I couldn't believe it. "Was that **air magic**? Air magic leaves green particles like that, right?"

Breeze nodded.

"I think he used the **Leap** ability."

Suddenly, I heard more footsteps behind us. But there were lighter this time.

The violet-haired girl from the Academy—**Bayard's friend**, Sephara—was running in our direction.

"Morning," she called out as she ran past the three of us . . .

. . . Then used the very **same Leap ability** to effortlessly glide through the sky. She made less of a thud when landing on the secret shop's roof.

"Ah? Doing a little shopping, eh?"

It was Bayard.

He walked up to us with the most annoying **grin** on his face.

"The jump's not **too hard**," he said. "With practice, I'm sure you can make it. And hey, about the other day . . . I did mean what I said. The Academy's **a rough school**. Come back in **a year or two** after you've had more training . . ."

"We have taken on **one quest** already," Breeze informed him. A bit proudly, too.

Well, she should be proud. That was **some quest** we went on . . .

I nodded my head. "And we've seen the **inside of a dungeon**," I said, rather proudly as well.

He made a slight laugh. "Yeah, **sure** you have. I'll see you kids around, huh?"

With that, he reached into his belt pouch and tossed a few copper coins onto the roof.

"It's Almsday," he said. "On this day, we give alms to **the poor**. Don't spend it all at once!"

Then he ran and, like the two before him, Leapt **impossibly** far. However, instead of landing skillfully, he crashed into the side of the shop's roof, which he grabbed and hung on to until he was finally able to pull himself up.

Even though it looked **painful**, Stump and I couldn't help but **laugh**.

The violet-haired girl, on the roof next to him, closed her eyes.
White sparkles and starlike motes swirled around him.

She'd just cast a **"Cure"** spell to heal him.

Bayard then saluted us.

"What **a couple of showoffs,**" Stump muttered.

I looked at Breeze. "I've seen you jump like that before.
Remember?"

She nodded. "I can't **control** it, though. I still need a lot of practice with it."

"Yet those two appeared to use it so effortlessly," Stump said glumly. **"Depressing."**

"Yeah."

The elf seemed **irritated**. "Emerald heard his family comes from Bayard's, a long line of Knights. **The Knights of Aetheria**. So he's probably had an incredible amount of training already."

A family of Knights . . . ?

It's said the Academy's best students are often picked up by the KoA.

They work for the kingdom by taking on quests. Each quest involves defeating or thwarting **the minions** of the Eyeless One.

With each quest completed, the **evil magician's** power and influence shrinks ever so slightly. So quests like that are really more than just "an adventure."

It's like saving the world.

I could only **dream of such a life . . .**

A life of questing, vanquishing evil, and casting **cool spells** like Leap.

All in day's work.

And at the end of the day, you go to one of several secret shops, and spend your hard-earned loot on the **coolest items** that exist.

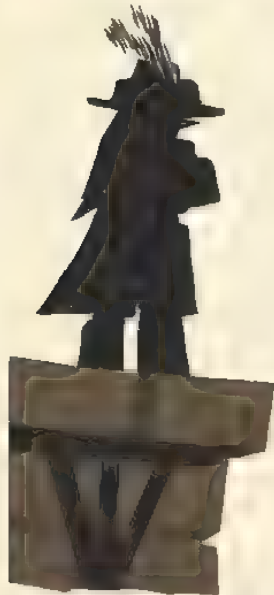
I glanced at the shop's roof. **At Bayard.**

That will be me up there someday, I thought. Or maybe today. Why not?

I can make that jump!

It's not too far! *Maybe if I just chug this Swiftness potion and get a good running start . . .*

WAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHH...



SPLASH



When I finally **surfaced, gasping and sputtering,**

I caught a glimpse of orange hair as Bayard leaned over the roof.

He flashed yet another annoying grin.

‘See ya around, kid.’

...

...

...

I can barely use Parry without going OOM . . .

And here this guy can jump the length of a classroom without breaking a sweat . . .

...

. . . . SPLASH!!

Stump landed in the water beside me.

Breeze fell in next. When the elf surfaced, her ears were drooping.

I noticed that her ears often move slightly depending on her mood.

‘What the heck?’

That’s when I felt something stuck to my cheek.

A lilypad.

I peeled it off **angrily.**

‘We’d better spend the rest of the day **training,**’ Breeze said. ‘We have that test on Friday. Err, **Hearthsday,** sorry.’

A test ...

Yeah, there's a **test** next week.

Or "trial." That's what they call tests around here.

We have to **fight golems** together as a group and try not to get hit. The less hits each group member takes, the better.

Parry will help out a great deal there.

It's **hard** to learn, though. Harder than Dual Wield.

Ophelia is going **to help** us improve, since she's been practicing it for a while. Still, **my MP is so low** . . .

Even if I become skilled with Parry, I still have 3 MP.

Meaning I can only use it **two times** during the test, without running out of mana and collapsing.

What am I going to do?

Seriously, what? Why can't we just have a muffin-eating contest? What better way to test someone's heroism than that? Eating a single muffin isn't so hard, but believe me when I say, consuming ten in a row is certainly **a heroic** feat.

QUESTSDAY
(MONDAY)

CRAFTSDAY
(TUESDAY)

KINGSDAY
(WEDNESDAY)

GUILDSDAY (THURSDAY)

I haven't made an entry **in a while.**

The days are blurring together. Studying magical theory. Meditating on strange words. Climbing down shafts. Eating sludge. Listening to the noble kids make fun of peasants like me. I've also been **sparring with Breeze** in the afternoon, practicing for that "trial" on Hearthsdays.

Tomorrow, I mean.

Emerald had an idea about that test.

She wondered if maybe we could all drink Potions of **Invisibility.**

If the golems can't see us, they can't hit us, right? But it's **against the rules.**

No potions allowed.

Emerald and Breeze do have "magical stealth" abilities that can turn them invisible. **Smoke Bomb, Hide.** That wouldn't help much, though. The rest of us would still be easy targets.

Stump, for example, is about as stealthy as an iron golem with buckets for feet.

Even so, Emerald has been working on that H.de ability of hers. Usually by trying to sneak up on me the way Breeze does. Sadly, she still needs a lot of practice.

She can only turn **partially invisible**, resulting in situations like this:



In other news, Breeze found **a book** in the Academy's library. It was an ancient looking tome with a blue cover that was worn and faded. I could barely make out **"Tome of Artistry."**

According to the introductory text, this book contained exercises to help improve one's **Art skill**. I flipped through a few chapters, noting a lot of **bizarre**, abstract drawings, and sketches. Even paintings.

Breeze smiled.

"Thought it might help."

What did she mean by that? **Help what**, exactly? What did I need a book like this for?

I **stared** at her, waiting for an explanation. She shrugged.

"Well, your art is good now, but . . . there's always room for improvement, right? That drawing of a slime wearing boots, for example . . ."

My drawing of a slime wearing boots? What, she didn't like that drawing? **Why? It was a slime!** Take your basic, ordinary green slime. Only it's wearing boots! How could anyone not like a simple little drawing like that? Imagine him doing **a little dance!** I spent over an hour on it, too!

"It even has a chapter on drawing hands," she said. "With fingers, I mean."

Fingers? I recoiled in sheer terror. My face probably looked like this: o ■ 0

Does she even know how hard it is to draw fingers?!

It's impossible! I've tried in the past, of course, and every time, a person's hands end up looking like tiny squids! The truth is fingers are just these noodly **spaghetti-things** that refuse to be properly drawn! And I'm sure no textbook—no matter how great—can ever change that!

No, I find it's best to draw people with their hands closed, **making fists.**

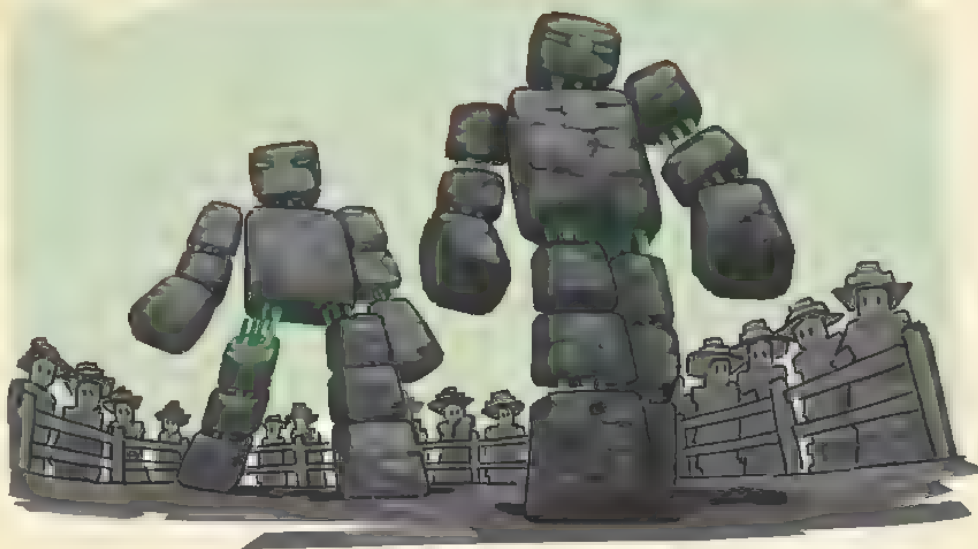
That way you don't have to worry about drawing fingers. Or you can get creative and draw someone sitting down at a desk.

Even if you just drew random objects to hide their hands, things that had no business being there, like two pineapples that were just floating in the air, **it would still be better than actually drawing fingers.**

To highlight this point, I'm going to include a drawing I'd thrown in my **scrap pile.** A drawing that was never meant to see the inside of any journal. **My first real attempt** at drawing hands with fingers.

. . . I'm sorry if this haunts your dreams.

HEARTHSDAY (FRIDAY)



Introducing the “heroic training golem.”

Essentially the “boss” version of what we’ve been fighting.

They also look scarier than the normal golems, with a frown not unlike a creeper’s.

For today’s test we had to fight *two of these things. For two minutes.* And if any member of your group gets knocked outside the fence—**failure.**

In short, a lot of kids got **thrashed** today. More than a few students were turned into what I can only describe as “mud

omelets.” Pounded into the mud by two sets of giant fists. This one kid, a scrawny dwarf boy, actually took some real damage. Luckily, there was a **healer** present who healed him with a Cure spell, and he was carried off by guards.

Of the three groups who went before ours **Bayard’s** group did the best. Six nobles, each with more training than Breeze. They used all sorts of defensive moves—**Parry, Tumble, Dash, Leap**—and only took three hits, resulting in **a score of S** (*better than an A*).

My party was up next.

And we had no **defensive** abilities except Parry.

So how could the seven of us possibly avoid being turned into mud omelets?

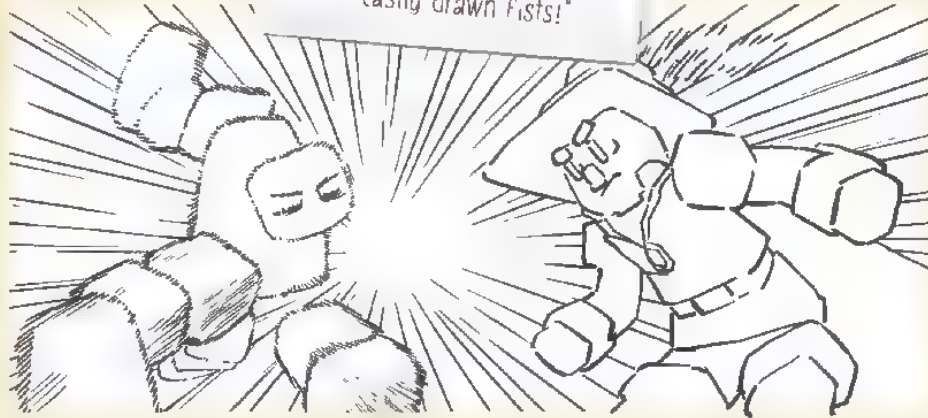
Were we really going to fail? What if we did so poorly on this test, we were actually **expelled** from the Academy?

Well, if that happened, I could always open up a small mushroom stew restaurant.

I’d have to start a new journal series, though. A record of **my new life** as **a restaurant owner**.

Would anyone still read that? Journal of an 8-Bit **Restaurateur?** Who cares if I fail to become a swordsman! Crafting mushroom stew is still interesting, **right** ??????????????????????
??

"At least there's some good news about today's test! The golems always make easily drawn Fists!"



This is where I get knocked back and **fly over the fence.**

Resulting in an automatic failure and expulsion for not only me but **all six of my friends.**

To anyone reading this, **I'm so sorry.** I know you wanted to see me graduate and become **a Knight.** But every book I write from now on will involve me running my small restaurant.

No quests.

No magic spells or cool adventures.

Just mushrooms, bubbling pots, and polite greetings to **my customers.** Many of whom will probably be heroic Knights.

Here you go, **hero sir!** A perfectly crafted bowl of triple mushroom stew! When eaten, it will boost your strength and HP,

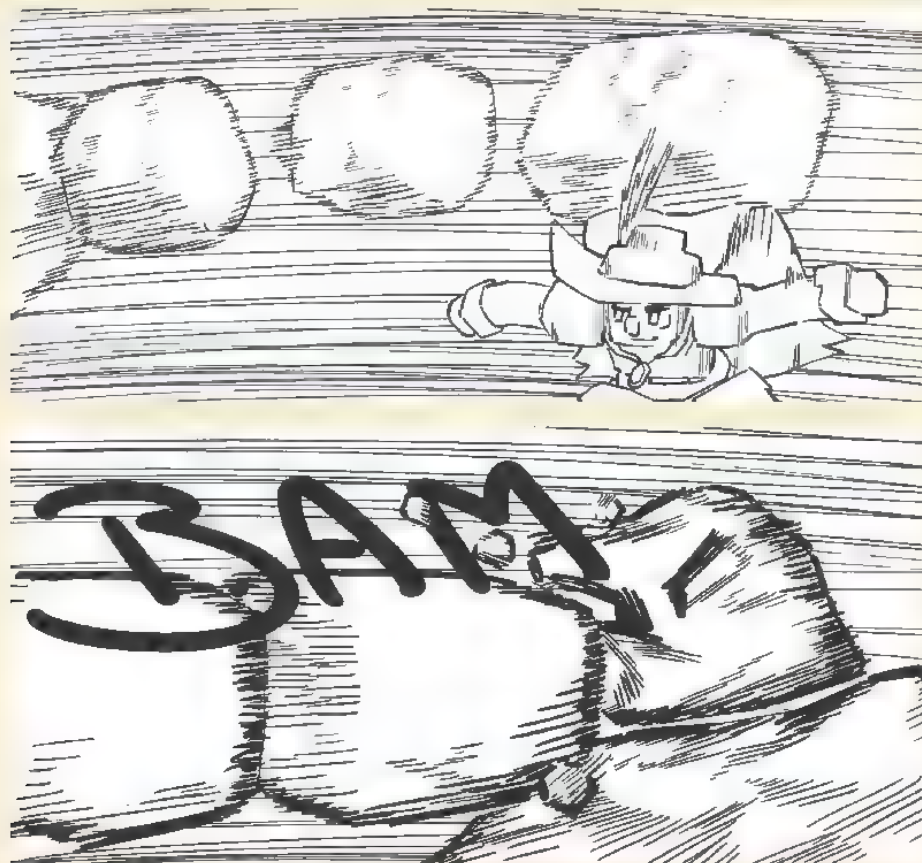
assisting you on your next quest! Please tell me all about your adventures when you return!

A true NPC.

That's my destiny.

There's one problem, though.

... I'm not the **biggest fan** of mushrooms.





It's called **infighting**.

Something I learned about in **Monster Studies**.

One golem hit the other, **aggroing** it, and that was it. A battle between giants.

As the two fought, making the angriest golem noises, my friends watched in total **amazement**. As did everyone else.

I'm not sure why no one else had **thought** of it. It was a fairly obvious solution to this test. It seemed obvious to me, at least, once I saw we'd be fighting two of them.

Bayard, realizing what was about to happen, turned red with rage. 'No, that's . . . That's **against the rules**, isn't it?!

They're cheating!"

Our instructor, Dirg, tugged at his beard. "Aye, this is a bit of **noobery**. But the only requirement for this test is that they remain inside the fence . . ."

He tugged at his beard again. "A **curious** strategy, indeed."

When our two minutes were up, every member of my group had been hit a total of zero times.

S+.

A perfect score.

And I should mention that the above illustrations only captured the **most important** moment of our fight.

Before diving out of the way, I deflected a golem's huge fist with Parry several times, as did Ophelia, Breeze. . . . Everyone. So now, the seven of us, nearly **OOM** and on the verge of collapse, could only smile.

That's part of **our training**, I guess.

Getting used to running low on mana, and spending a good part of each day just resting, recovering . . .

I barely remember returning to my room, crashing face down onto my bed . . .

As I drifted off,
there was one thing I could absolutely
say with certainty . . .



HEARTHSDAY (FRIDAY)—UPDATE II

Later on, I had to speak with Aery in her office.

At first, she just went over **my mana**. "Your MP hasn't increased," she said. "Yet, I'd like to mention that you have a total of **19,820 XP**. That's a lot of experience for your age. I assume much of that was gained during **the quest** you mentioned." She looked up. "You should have no problem reaching **fifth level as a warrior**. By the time you graduate, I mean."

A level-five warrior . . .

Things were finally starting to look up.

I'd only expected to graduate at level two or three at the most.

"Also, you did very well in today's trial," she said. "And **the king** has personally donated a number of books to help students in need." Aery held up an ancient looking tome. "They're called **librams**. In short, a libram contains one spell. Upon being read, it will transfer that spell to the reader."

Transferred to the reader . . . ?

So what she's saying is, I can

I nearly fell over in my chair. *I can*

Aery smiled. "By that, I mean, you'll automatically learn the book's spell."

..... I CAN LEARN SPELLS
JUST BY READING BOOKS?!

WuuuuhhhHHhHHhhHHH---q-
ropfgerpdrofkwocjxlakpocesod

[#]...!

[# // #] ... !!

[#][#][#][#][#][#][#][#][#][#][#][#]...!!!!!!!!!!!!

—kjeodpd—

--kjldvjpdspffv--

—jflsakfkflsokdsjfk—kfvj—vjevj—

---djvd---

—jvjjrggg— — — —

-9.

Yeah, I know.

It's **not professional** for one to write a bunch of gibberish in their journal.

However, as I've mentioned before, I go for **accuracy**, and the above was an accurate recreation of my thought process at this very moment.

... Magical b-books that ... t-transfer s-s-sp-p ...

Breeze had once mentioned books like this. They're said to be rare, though, **highly sought after, extremely valuable.**

In fact, Max mentioned them yesterday. He said they can sometimes be found in item shops, but they often go for **fifty thousand emeralds or more.** And now . . .

Aery looked at me and laughed. "Anyway, the libram I'm giving you contains the spell **Air Dash.** An **essential** spell. Every student should know it by the time they graduate."

"So I just . . . Read it. **That's it.**"

She nodded. "And make sure to look at all **the runes and illustrations.** That's important." Another smile. "You won't have class tomorrow. I want you to do some **"light reading."** I'll make sure your friends get their own copies, of course. The seven of you have done quite well so far. And you'll want to keep eating your shrelbs. They really will increase your MP. With your new magic, you'll need **all the mana** you can get."

"Yeah."

. . . I will eat **those vegetables.**

As long as it means being able to cast a real spell, I will wolf them down, whether they're baked in pies, sauteed or fried, fermented, pickled or boiled to a mush. Raw, even. Straight from the ground. Pixels of dirt still clinging on. That's **how far** I'm willing to go.

Heck, even if I have to eat an entire
grass block,
I will find a way.

HYMNSDAY
(SATURDAY)

ALMSDAY
(SUNDAY)

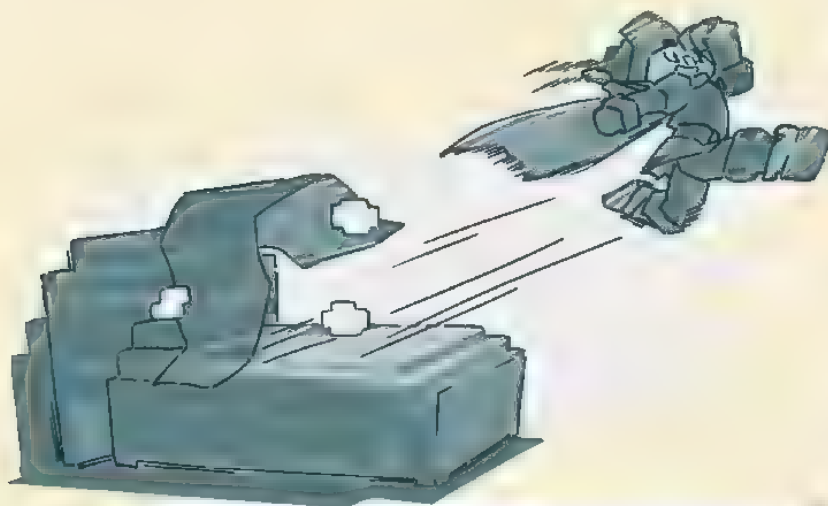
QUESTSDAY (MONDAY)

This morning, I was preparing to crawl out of bed like a basic slime again. Then **I realized** . . .

. . . I no longer had to.

On this day, **the fifteenth of Diamondstar**, I woke up the way **a legendary hero** probably does.

By flying out of bed with a spell.



Air Dash
(air spell, instant cast): Sends the caster flying a short distance in one direction. With enough practice, this spell can be used while in the air.

TBWHAT'S HGOW HREAL HEORES DO IT!!!!!!

THEYT DPONT CRAWL OUT OF BED LIKE SLIMES THEY FLY
OUT OF BED USING SEPLLS!!!!!!!!!!!!

Yeah, so I made a few **spelling errors** just now. Come on, I was born in a village that doesn't even have proper chairs! Just stair blocks! You can't expect perfection from someone like me! And you can't expect me to not be excited about this!

Air Dash.

A spell I learned last night.

It's "**instant cast**," meaning there's no chanting required.

You only have to focus on the spell's arcane word, and you'll fly one and a half blocks with **blinding speed**.

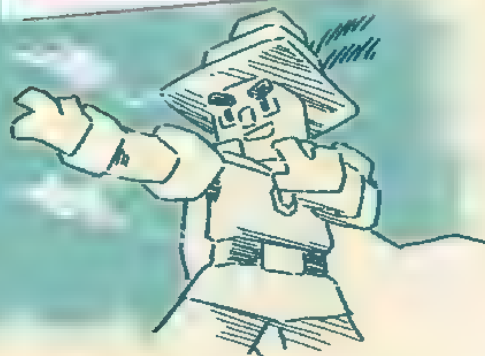
I'll admit, after flying out of bed, I **crashed** to the floor, then floundered around like a **squid on sand**. Being sent so fast in one direction is more than a little disorienting. I still need a lot of practice.

Still, the fact that I'd used real magic at all . . .

"I HAVE
MAGIC!!"



"CORRECTION,
WE HAVE
MAGIC!!!!!!!!!!!!!!"



If you're wondering about my friends, they all learned **Air Dash** as well, and Max additionally **begged** for a libram of **Ice Bolt**.

An ice spell!

Max can actually cast an ice spell!

A low-level one, but still! It's a spell actual mages often use!

To celebrate, the seven of us went out into the Academy gardens and practiced as much as we could.

We used **all of our provided mana biscuits**—we're only given three per day—so we bought a few extra stacks from the Academy's item shop.

That set us back **two thousand emeralds**. That's right. **Two thousand**. I chipped in over one thousand myself. It was so worth it, though, because we were **able to spam** our new spells for more than twenty minutes straight. You can't put a price on **skill gains**.

I also raced Breeze at one point. I almost won, too! As we ran through the gardens, past rows of rectangular shrubs, I chugged a Swiftness potion and took the lead! I then used **my new spell** to gain even more distance and . . .

. . . **Lost my balance** and fell into the grass. Magic really does take some getting used to.

How sad . . .

I cheated and still lost . . .

Annoyingly, Breeze used Air Dash to zoom up beside me. The elf managed to stay upright by leaning back somewhat, then **skidded to a halt in an expert way**.

"How are you so good at this?" I grumbled, picking myself up.

Breeze shrugged. "It's **an air spell**. Elves are said to have a talent with **water and air magic**."

"That must be nice."

So elves are **naturally skilled** with using two different elements. And what about me?! Were my distant ancestors really **powerful magic users**? Again, I find that so hard to believe, because every time I try this new spell, it's a struggle to avoid flopping around like a fish . . .

"From what I understand, when it comes to magic, villagers, or nighborn, aren't known for having any particular strengths," Breeze said. "However, that also means you don't have any weaknesses."

Uh huh. What weaknesses do you have, exactly?"

"Err, we're supposedly **not too great** with fire or earth magic."

"Ah."

Stump had rambled on about this stuff a few times already.

Dwarves are better than most at crafting things made of stone, and wielding axes and hammers, while elves are better at woodworking, archery, and riding. Things like that.

I had no idea that extended to magic, though.

Nor was I aware that some are weaker than others with **certain elements**.

Wait. So this means I'm potentially better at earth and fire magic than Breeze?

Let me say it again:

I MAY ACTUALLY BE BETTER
THAN BREEZE AT
SOMETHING????????????????
????????????????
????????????????

. 0 0 (? # ? # ? ? ! # # # # # # # # # # - # - #
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@ ■ @

What an interesting development.

Clearly I must learn a low-level fire spell so I can taunt her endlessly. —. —.

It was about this time that Stump approached with Ophelia and the rest. Stump was giving them **a lecture** on Air Dash.

" . . . It's one of the **most useful** spells out there. You can use it to dodge a monster's big attack, dodge a spell, or catch up to someone. A **real hero move**. In fact, it would have taken us months to learn this spell the 'normal way.' **Without librams**, I mean . . ."

"Thanks for the mana biscuits," Lola said to me. "Although, even if it was **great** to practice our magic at length today, do you really think it was a good idea to spend **so much money** like that?"

"I just don't want us to **fall behind**," I said with a shrug.

Emerald nodded. "That's just how it goes at **a school like this**. A lot of students here are spending almost everything they have on mana-restoring items, so they can practice more."

"**It's true**," Stump said. "I saw Bayard and crew in the item shop yesterday. They dropped over **five thousand emeralds**! And not on biscuits but potions! **Mana potions!** One good chug and you're back to full mana, **just like that!**"

"A mana potion doesn't restore all of your mana," Emerald said. "**Only about five MP** or so."

"Okay, whatever. Still, can you imagine having potions like that on you **at all times**? Must be **nice** being so rich."

Max patted him on the back. Then the aspiring mage smiled at me in particular. "I believe **a big thanks** is in order, Runt. **You're the reason** we have these new spells. Those who failed the trial were only given the basic Dash ability. Not this improved version. And we definitely would have failed if not for that **infighting trick** of yours."

"It wouldn't have worked **without the rest of you**," I said. "Even Emerald managed to Parry what, five times?"

"Five times? Or was it four?" Max turned to Emerald. His voice was **a bit cool** when he said, "But yes, you did **really good**. **Nice work**."

Obviously, Max was a bit sore about how well she did the other day.

For **a novice** like her, using an ability five times **without resting**, even a basic one like Parry, is a fairly amazing feat.

It's kind of surprising, but among the seven of us, Emerald has **the second-highest MP**. One point below Breeze. And Breeze has had years of training.

Lola must have sensed how **annoyed** Max was, because she quickly changed the subject. "While this is all rather **exciting**, I must say, it is getting rather cold out, isn't it? Think I'll head back inside. Anyone care to join me for some tea?"

It was cold today. Overcast, damp.

And now, **a chill wind** was picking up, howling eerily as it wound through the garden.

That shouldn't be surprising. So it's cold. It's the middle of Diamondstar. Still, I'd never heard wind like that, or seen **a sky so gloomy . . .**



CRAFTSDAY (TUESDAY)

It started **raining** yesterday evening, and it hasn't stopped.

We still had class in the training grounds, though. By the end, everyone was wet, freezing, and covered in mud.

I will say, the golems are **a lot easier** with my new spell. But I'm about ready to try enchanting my school uniform with **Waterproof**. After all, I dream of becoming a knight. And what kind of knight walks around in soggy boots?!

Have you ever heard that sound?

Of someone walking around in waterlogged footwear?

There's nothing heroic about it! I mean, I went back in after Swordplay, and it sounded like I was walking on slime blocks!

KINGSDAY (WEDNESDAY)

It's **STILL** raining.

At one point, it even started hailing again.

And when I say "**hail**," I mean ice cubes two pixels in width—half the size of your fist.

There's been the loudest **thunder**, too, like it's right outside, with lightning flashing constantly, flickering. **We've never seen anything like it.**

Max says it might be a low level "**manastorm**," a kind of magically charged storm. Typically brought on by a disruption in the flow of mana throughout the world.

I tried to comprehend. "So what . . . causes them?"

When the mage turned to me, his black glasses held a sudden gleam. "Well, the last time the world **saw weather like this** was ages ago. **During the war.** The enemy was using a form of magic known as "**fell magic**." Spells of this type are **very powerful**, but corruptive. Heavy use will lead to **an imbalance** in the world."

Max turned back to the window. "Anyway, if I had to guess, I'd say this is related to whatever Herobrine's **minions** are doing up north."

"I don't understand." Stump, moving closer to the window, looked out and sighed. "Is the world situation really **so bad?**"

Max shrugged. "Is it **any surprise?** Things haven't exactly been great for a while. I mean, months ago, we had slimes raining down on our village."

"Yeah, but . . ."

" . . ."

" . . ."

" . . ."

" . . . ?"

" . . . ?"

" . . ."

You'll want to **pay attention** here.

This is where my best friend asked something profound.

It was a simple question. Yet the single most important thing anyone could have possibly asked.

" . . ."

" . . ."

" . . . **Why hasn't the world been saved yet?**"

" . . . ?"

" . . . ?"

Huh?

Why hasn't the . . .

I looked at him **in total confusion.**

And I opened my mouth to ask what he meant by that. Then I **froze.** *Wait, is he talking about . . .*

. . .

A realization was slowly forming.

It seemed Max was arriving at the same conclusion, because after looking at Stump, **he suddenly froze, too.**

I looked at Max.

. . .

He looked at me.

. . .

Then Stump looked at us **in total desperation,** waiting for us to respond.

. . .

. . .

. . .

. . .

. . .

. . .

. . .

What a question, right?

Why **HASN'T** the world been saved yet?

Why are monsters **still** growing in number? Why was our village nearly **destroyed**? And why are ice cubes now falling from the sky?

Okay, so there's an **evil wizard named Herobrine**, also known as the Eyeless One to the elves, the Dark One to the dwarves, while most of those living in Dawnsbloom know of him as the Demon Lord. And yeah, the people of Aetheria really need to come together and settle on one name for him, because this is just getting **confusing**.

Anyway . . .

I suppose Stump was really asking:

Why hasn't he been stopped yet? Why hasn't anyone **shut him down** already?

Because . . .

* . . *

* . . *

* . . *

* . . *

* . . *

* . . *

* . . *

* . . *

* . . *

"I'm not sure why I never thought of that myself," Max said at last. "You are, of course, referring to the **otherworlders**, correct?"

Otherworlders.

That's what everyone calls them around here.

Heroes from another world. Like **Kolbert**. Like **Steve** and **Mike**.

They arrived in this world some time ago. Before I began writing.

Back then, I witnessed firsthand what they were capable of. Our village wouldn't have survived **without their help**.

What's more . . .

Roughly one thousand of these people are said to have arrived here.

One thousand! An actual army of summoned heroes, each said to be blessed with divine strength, skill, and magic.

So what's the problem? When it comes to saving a world, how many heroes does it take? And how long does it usually take them? They've been here for what, half a year?!

With that in mind . . .

WHY HASN'T OUR WORLD BEEN SAVED YET?!

WHY HAVE THINGS ONLY GROWN WORSE EVER SINCE THEY ARRIVED?!

AND WHY DIDN'T I EVER THINK ABOUT THIS BEFORE?! IT'S THE SINGLE MOST OBVIOUS THING!

...

"I, um . . ." Max was clearly struggling with this as well. "Well, many of them did arrive in the middle of nowhere, with no explanation, no instructions, no assistance. It's not like we can expect much from anyone given those conditions."

"Yet some did appear in the capital," I said. "While others soon made their way there. **Where are they now?**"

Max shrugged. "Kolbert did mention that some of them were sailing to **the kingdom of Novaly**. Still, I'm sure not all of them fled . . ."

Stump seemed doubtful. "Where are they, then? **What happened?**"

"I suppose the library here might have some records," Max said, after a long pause. "Perhaps we can learn more there?"

. . .

And so, the three of us vowed to **solve this mystery**.

Well, actually, the seven of us. We ran into the girls on our way to the library and explained the situation.

"Aww, it's just like old times!" Emerald said while we ran through the halls. **"A good, old-fashioned snooping around!**
In a dusty library, too! We haven't done that in at least two months! I was starting to miss it!"

"What's all the rush?" Lola called out. "And what's an **otherworlder?**" She was lagging behind, carrying a sack of muffins she'd baked for us. "Hey, will you guys wait up?"

I handed her a Swiftess potion.

What?!

I keep them on hand at all times!
I'm always prepared
for situations like this!

GUILDSDAY (THURSDAY)

We found a **public archive** of the city records.

It was six months old, but it did have some information on **the heroes** now living in our world.

"All right, so it seems every generation has had what they call a . . . **"Demon Lord,"** Emerald said, reading with Max. "Currently, that's **Herobrine**. And before him, there was **the Lich King**. A skeletal mage with an army of undead."

"And before the Lich King, there was the **Bad Druid**," Max said. "Apparently, he made all sorts of twisted creations, corruptions of nature. He's the one responsible for **creating creepers**. As well as another plant monster called **the truffid**. I've never heard of them."

So every so often, **a bad guy** pops up.

However, throughout history, these villains were easily shut down by **Aetherian heroes**.

The Eyeless One is **different**, though. He was one battle away from destroying the world ages ago, so the king was rather alarmed upon learning of his revival.



"Seems they learned this **seven months** ago," Max continued. "On the **tenth of Manatide**. The king called a number of high-level priests and magicians to the castle. A special ceremony was held in the courtyard on the twelfth." Max paused, reading. "This ceremony was essentially . . . **a large group spell**, to summon assistance. Over **three hundred otherworlders** did appear in the castle courtyard that day. All possessed a class as well as magic. Some even had what's known as an **exalted class**. Holy Knight, Dragoon, Sage, and so on. Of course, it normally takes a great deal of training to obtain a class like that."

The section he was reading had two illustrations.

This event was recorded by royal scribes, and they did sketches. And yeah, their **Art skill** seems to be much higher than mine . . .



"O, great heroes!"
"I beg you for assistance!"
"Our world, Aetheria, is
in great peril . . ."
"The Demon Lord known
as Herobrine has been
resurrected by his
followers, an evil sect . . ."



"Of course, there was **a problem** with the spell," Max said. "**One thousand** should have arrived that day not **three hundred**. The rest appeared elsewhere, in seemingly **random** locations. Like what happened to the Legion, and Steve, Mike . . ."

"Huh."

Emerald pointed at the next paragraph. "They seem to think Herobrine disrupted the summoning spell."

"**No way.**" Stump rubbed his chin. "So . . . he knew. He somehow knew the king, upon learning of his return, would **summon heroes** in response. He then found a way to disrupt their strategy. And most wound up in **random** swamps, deserts, beaches."

"I've heard that some even arrived **in the middle of the ocean**," Max said. "Or on tiny islands."

"He really is that **smart**, huh?"

"We've known that for a while," Ophelia reminded him. "The way his monsters worked together during those first few attacks on Villagetown. Zombies and slimes protecting creepers. He's **fiendishly** clever."

"**Oh wow!**" Emerald exclaimed. She was still reading. "So they learned a few things about otherworlders that day. For one, all of them had one **"divine gift."** They're like really powerful abilities. One hero was able to **"freeze time."** Another could summon **a small dragon**. And three of them had the ability to **"respawn upon death."** Sound familiar?"

"Steve could do that, too," I said. **"Wait.** That means not all of them can respawn?"

"Guess not. Only a few have that power. Oh, check this out. It says a year on Earth is only three hundred and sixty-five days long. **How weird is that?**"

Breeze raised an eyebrow. "Do they only have eleven months or something?"

"No, there's **twelve**," Emerald said. "But their longest is only thirty one days. Huh. So in that world, we would be around . . ."

"Thirteen and a half," Max said. "Well, I'd be almost fourteen. **That's . . . so weird.**"

Lola had stopped smiling. **"Whatever happened to them?** The ones who appeared in the capital, I mean?"

"It doesn't say much," Max said. "They were given supplies. Armor, weapons, and librams. They were later called to a conference with the king and his advisors. But there's no mention of what went on there. Nor where they went afterward."

"There must be at least some of them left in this city," I said. **"We need to find them.** They have to know something. And maybe at least one of them knows Steve and Mike, or knows where they are?"

Steve and Mike.

I haven't thought about those two in so long.

They took off from our village over a month ago, promising to return with help.

What happened to them? **Where are they now?**

Believe me when I say, I will get to the bottom of this! I'll spend every bit of spare time I have scouring this city. Every last inn and item shop.

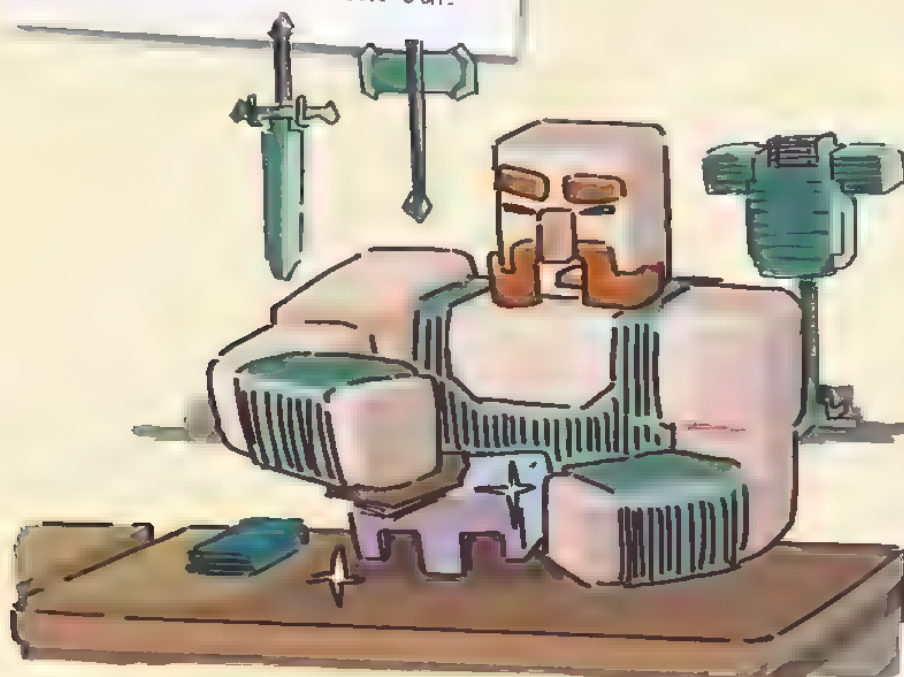
Besides, I heard there's this really nice cafe downtown, so even if my searching doesn't pan out, at least I'll be able to stock up on cookies, right?

HEARTHSDAY (FRIDAY)

"Otherworlders? Ah, you mean those . . . hero folk. Now that you mention it, I haven't seen any in a while. Can't say I miss them! They'd always barge in, make a face, and ask about the most ridiculous sounding food! As if my shrelb and boag stew isn't the tastiest dish in town!"



"The last otherworlder I saw
came in without saying a
word, made a campfire in
the middle of my shop,
and . . . started roasting
a chicken. When I asked
him to leave, he called me
a muffin-loving NPC. Still
trying to figure that one out."



"No, I don't get too many of them here. Still, there was this one time. About seven months ago? A group of them rushed into my shop in a state of panic. They kept talking about a . . . mind link.



And electro . . . magio . . . something or rather. They then demanded that I connect them to a game master. They said it was a real emergency. Of course, I couldn't understand what they were talking about. And I almost asked if they wanted a trim. Because the only emergency I could see was their outlandish hairstyles!"

So it seems the locals **don't know very much.**

Aery wasn't very helpful, either. We spoke to her at the front desk after coming back empty-handed.

"That's really not **my area of expertise,**" she said. "They're not exactly the type who would benefit from **a school like this.** I have heard that they've been working closely with **the king** training and coming up with a strategy for the **Demon Lord.** Err, wait, where you come from, he's known as **The Eyeless One,** isn't he?"

... Or Herobrine."

Well, maybe it really is that simple?

If they really are working with the king, maybe they're in the castle? Or somewhere near it?

I'll find you, **Steve.** And when I do, you have a lot of explaining to do! You could have at least sent me a letter! Lorica has a guild called **the Messenger's Guild,** and through them, you can send mail to any town in the kingdom!

A letter to my village would have only cost **thirty gold!**

**That's only three hundred emeralds, you
cheapskate !!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!**

HEARTHSDAY (FRIDAY)—UPDATE II

Tonight, dinner was **shrelb casserole**.

How could I forget **the cookies**? We walked past three bakeries!

Max, like the rest of us, was **staring at** his plate. "I can't believe nobody seems to know anything."

"Maybe we'll have better luck tomorrow," Ophelia said, looking **gloomy**. "**Oh, wait**. We won't have time, huh?" She was talking about **evening classes**.

Stump, Max, Lola, and Ophelia are **falling behind**, according to our instructors.

So starting tomorrow, they have to take some **extra** classes in the evenings. And Breeze is now taking some sort of **special fencing class** in the evenings. It's actually held outside the school, at some fancy elven hall, by invitation only.

According to her that training will last "**at least two weeks**." Which means . . .

...

...

Emerald smiled at me. "Don't worry. Even if they're too busy, **my schedule is still free**."

..."

No! Not her! I couldn't think of a worse person to explore a city with! Today, she whined about the rain nonstop!

Why wasn't she assigned extra classes, anyway? How is she doing so well? Somehow, she's **nearly as good as** Breeze with magic. She still needs a lot of practice with **Hide**, but I've never seen her fail an Air Dash the way I fail.

Still, Emerald is . . . **Emerald**. Only tolerable in small doses.

I looked at Breeze. "So. Is there any way I could join that fencing class?"

Emerald **glared** at me. "You'd be lucky to hang out with someone as **cool** as me!"

"Um, you complained about your feet hurting before we even left the school," I said.

"**So what?** These new shoes of ours are practically enchanted with Discomfort VII, **you air jockey!**"

"Squid crafter."

"Squid brewer."

"Slime burglar."

Emerald rolled her eyes. "That doesn't even make sense! How does someone steal a slime? And who would they be stealing it from?"

"Um, a . . . slime farmer?"

". . . They're not sheep, you **idiot!** You can't farm slimes!"

". . ."

... Help me.

I can't take any more of this.

This is all your doing, Steve! **You and the rest of your kind!**

If you had just dealt with Herobrine like you were **SUPPOSED** to, I wouldn't currently be in this mess!

Without The Eyeless One, there would be no need for so many heroes, and this school wouldn't need so many students, and I'd still be at home, **warm and snug** in my little bed!

You call yourself a hero?!

Back in Villagetown, you spent three weeks **trying to craft pizza!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!**

HYMNSDAY (SATURDAY)

Today, our search **went way worse** than yesterday.

I know it would have been different if Breeze had been there. She would have kept us in check.

Without her around, there was no one to stop me from . . . **being me**. Or Emerald from being Emerald. In short, things quickly got out of hand.



"Otherworlders?
Buy something or scram!
I haven't got time for . . .
Hey! Kid! I told you to
put that sword down!"



"Otherworlders?
Yeah, I know them! They trashed
my shop a few months back!
Don't even mention those rats!
In fact, get out of my shop!
Out! Not another word"



"Eat a
dirt block,
squidface!"





Two more weeks.

Two more weeks **without Breeze**.

Without anyone except Emerald, actually. **How cruel is that?**

Our classes have been getting **harder**, too. And on Monday, we'll be starting to spar against heroic golems regularly.

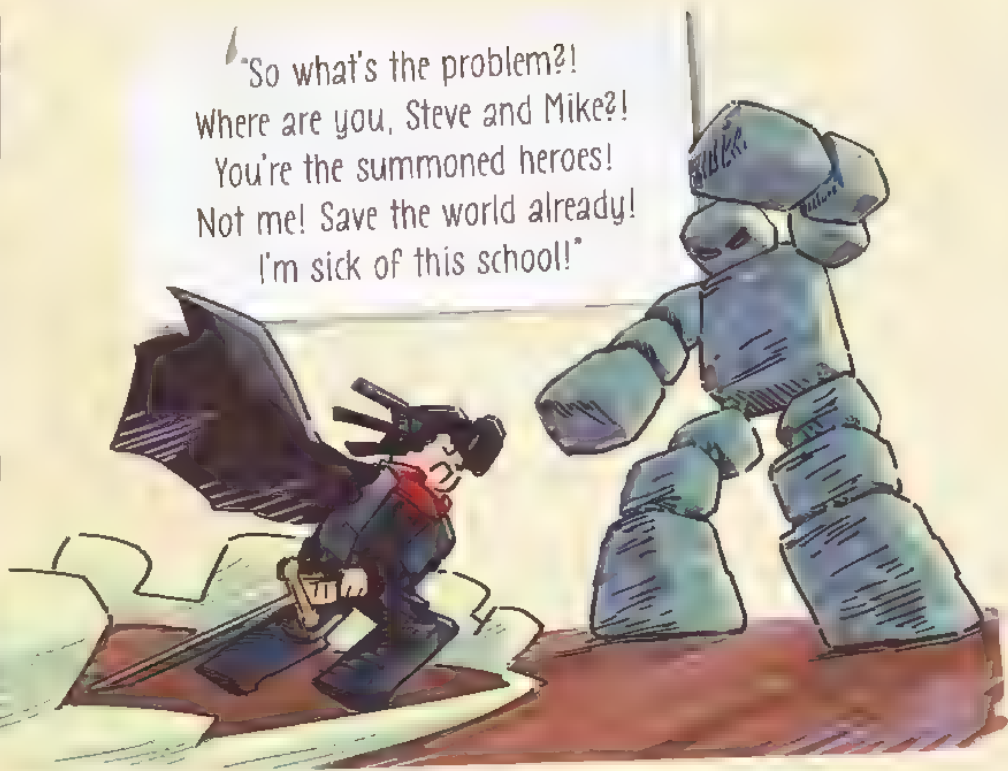
I tried fighting one alone after dinner. The girls had left to crash in their room, Max and Stump left for ours, and the training grounds are **always open**. To blow off a little steam, a late night training session was just what I needed. I even threw on my **black armor** and brought **Eventide**, the sword Breeze gave me a while back.

It **didn't** go so well, though.

Counting Air Dash, I still only have **two** defensive moves.

And sure, I could draw another picture of me getting slammed into the mud by a giant golem, but at this point, it's just getting old.

"So what's the problem?!
Where are you, Steve and Mike?!
You're the summoned heroes!
Not me! Save the world already!
I'm sick of this school!"



... I wish I was **an otherworlder**.

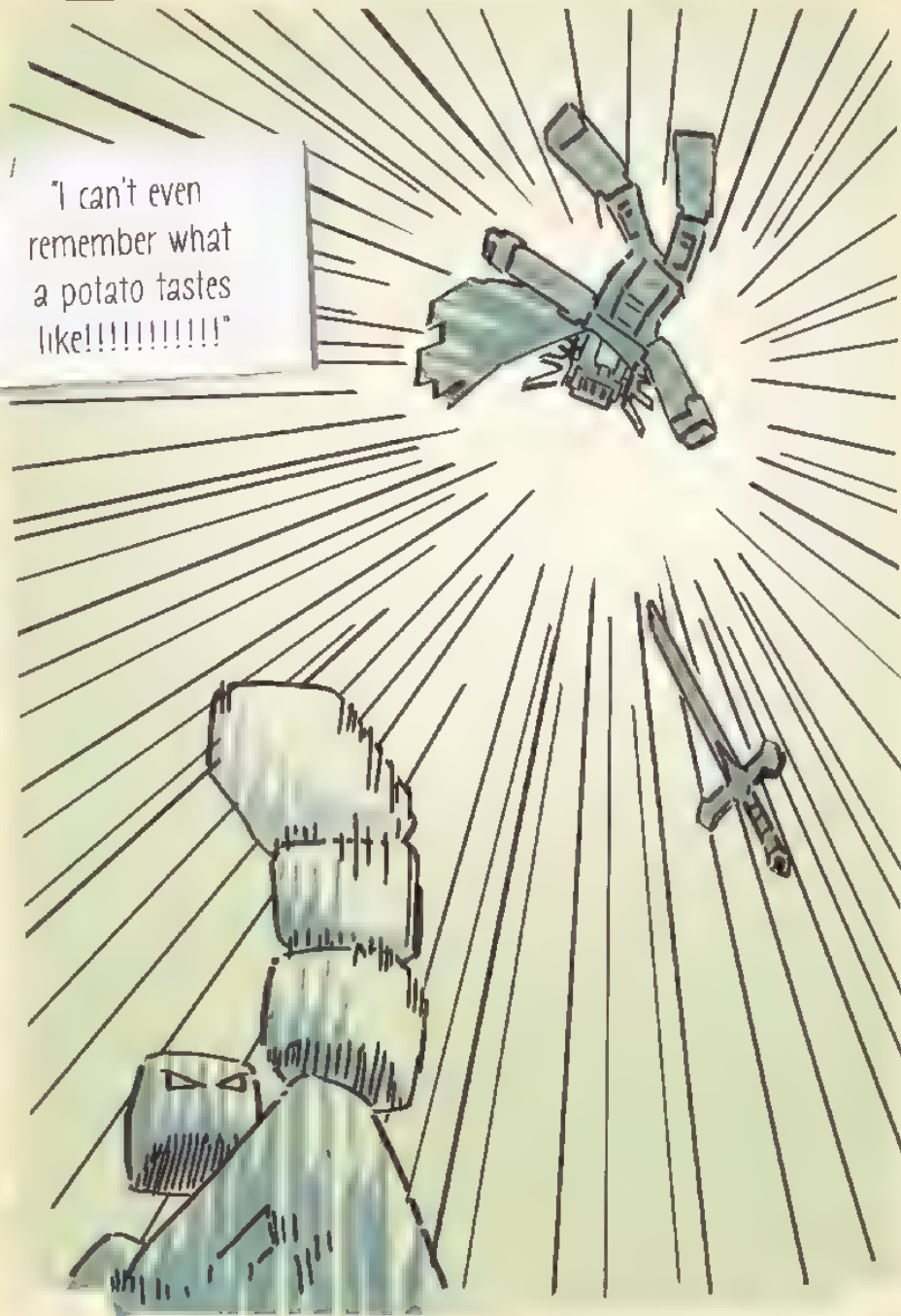
I mean, just to obtain a few **meager** abilities, and a basic class like **warrior**, I have to go through all this! Training at this **intense school**, and eating these awful vegetables!

Meanwhile, they didn't have to do a thing!

They simply woke up in this world, already possessing spells and classes! **Just like in a fairy tale!**



"I can't even
remember what
a potato tastes
like!!!!!!!!!!!"



ALMSDAY
(SUNDAY)

QUESTSDAY (MONDAY)



I tried **painting** today.

After all, it's said to help you **relax**, and that book Breeze gave me has exercises on everything from pastel to watercolor.

Not bad, right? **My first masterpiece**. Emerald said I made her look like a potato, though.

We were just sitting around in the gardens. It was actually somewhat warm today, no rain, and she was going through one of our boring textbooks called "**Aetheria Geographica.**"

"So most scholars seem to think our world is shaped like an **immense cube**," Emerald read. "At the very top, there's a thin layer of grass, dirt, and stone. Beneath that, it's bedrock, over half the way down. At which point you'll find an even harder type of rock."

"But the elders always said Aetheria is **flat**."

She offered a slight shrug. "Some of them also believe the moon is a giant, moldy potato."

"Maybe it is?"

"**Maybe.**" Closing her textbook, she stood up and looked at the sky. It was still overcast. "We still have a few hours until the rest get back. How about we hit up a few shops?"

"As long as you promise not to call anyone a **squidface**," I said.

"Oh, come on, how was I supposed to know? I mean, sure, I heard it was a serious **insult** around here, but I had no idea it was **that bad!**"

...

In the capital, "squidface" is considered an **unspeakable** profanity. A Demon Lord in the past had a face with **tentacles** and looked, by all accounts, like a squid person. He was a minor villain, I guess, not quite on the same level as Herobrine, but he still caused enough chaos for Loricans to remember him even now.

His armies of slimes attacked countless farms, and devoured entire crops left and right, forcing farmers to raise their prices, until

eventually, a single carrot cost more than twenty emeralds, and "I'm having vegetable stew for dinner" was actually seen as something of a boast.

Emerald smiled innocently. "Anyway, sure. **No more squidface** . I promise."

" . . . Okay."

I don't know why **I agreed**.

Even if she promised not to use that one specifically, who knew how many other insults she had **up her sleeve?**

And what about me? Could I trust myself? Upon stepping into a new weapon shop filled with that new sword smell, would I be able to **resist** the urge to pick something up and swing it around, while pretending to be a hero?

Would I?

It was a sword with an enchantment called **" +3."**

A magical **plus enchantment**. We read about that in class the other day. Each **"plus"** gives one level of every basic enchantment. Sharpness, Unbreaking, Accuracy, Balance, Comfort, Lightness . . .

Too many to list.

So the weapon I was looking at now effectively had all of those—**at level three!** Sharpness III, Unbreaking III, Accuracy III . . . I couldn't even imagine having **a weapon like that!**

And I almost reached for it.

Until I overheard a conversation at the counter nearby.



A young man with blonde hair had started arguing with the shopkeeper. "... **Twenty emeralds?! It's worth way more than that!**" It seemed he was trying to sell a rather crude-looking helmet.

"That's my **final offer**," the shopkeeper replied. "This helmet is low grade, not much durability. No one buys that kind of gear

anymore. Not even the rookies. The lower level monsters have been getting **a lot stronger** lately, or so they've been telling me. They need solid hardware to even stand a chance."

"Fine." The young man then drew a sword and placed it on the counter as well. **"How much for this one?"**

The sword had clearly seen a lot of use. It had an emerald blade, and several of the blade's green pixels were missing.

"Hmm." The shopkeeper replied with a number so low, it even made me angry. "Give ya fifty for both, kiddo."

The young man sagged his shoulders. ". . . You're lucky I **need the cash.**"

And that was it.

He took the money—**fifty silver drakken**—and headed for the door.

Like the sword he'd just sold, his armor had seen better days. A chain hauberk and chausses in complete tatters.

His hair was a mess as well. Stray pixels everywhere. It looked like he hadn't slept in days. And one of his boots had **TEETH marks** in it. Or fang marks. **Whatever.**

That was when I realized who it was. Of course, even before I saw him, his voice had **seemed familiar**. The voice of someone I knew months ago. **A few months.** But it felt like **so long ago** . . .

[illegible]

"... Mike?"

QUESTDAY (MONDAY) UPDATE II



It was him.

Mike. Otherworlder and all-around **nice guy**. He looked like he'd been living in a cave, subsisting on nothing but slimes, **but it was him.**

As I stared at him, I thought back to the Villagetown days, and all the times he'd helped out. And what felt like **every possible emotion** welled up inside of me. **Happiness. Confusion. Surprise. Fear. Sadness.** Even hunger. I hadn't eaten dinner yet.

Wait, is hunger an emotion? **Who cares?!** Why is he here? And why does he look like that? **What happened?!**

Then I almost felt **sorry** for him. Because those questions were only a fraction of what I had saved up. He had no idea what he was about to go through. A **tidal wave** of question marks was heading his way.

However, when he finally spoke . . .

". . . Runt? Emerald? **What are you doing here?**

I **couldn't say anything**. I was still so overwhelmed, you could have handed me a grass block, told me it was a slice of pizza, and I probably would have taken a few nibbles before realizing what it was.

Emerald came through for me, though: "What are **you** doing here?!"

"Well, I . . ." He let out a **small sigh**. "I just got caught up with what's happening here and . . ." He paused, apparently noticing our uniforms. His expression **went grim**. "Listen, you really shouldn't be here. Go back as soon as you can. I mean it. **The situation is really bad . . .**"

He began rambling on about monsters. The same sort of stuff **Kolbert** had hinted at, and **Elric** had mentioned on the road.

Countless farms were being attacked north of here, by things no one's ever seen. Like **red slimes** that can breathe small goutts of flame. And **"corrupted blazes."** In Mike's words, they're a "twisted, nightmare version of the standard blaze" . . . Whatever that means.

I stepped closer. **"Mike."** Despite all the questions I had, there was only one that truly mattered. **"Where's Steve?"**

"About that . . ." Mike's face **grew dark**. Darker than Breeze in a **serious mood**. Darker than Emerald the other day after we came back to the Academy totally drenched. Even darker than Stump's when we finally ran out of **"travel rations,"** which is probably the darkest expression I can imagine.

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"... He's gone."

I staggered a bit. **"Gone."**

Mike nodded weakly. "We lost him on our last expedition. There're some ruins under the city. The Eyeless One was supposedly seen sneaking around there, so we went exploring, I . . . During our last trip, **this thing**, it . . . Got him . . ."

By now **the whole world was spinning**, and Mike's words seemed so **distant**, as if coming from another room. I think Emerald helped keep me upright, I don't know. What was he saying, anyway? **Steve couldn't be gone!** He's a **hero**, and one with a **divine gift** that lets him come back to life! An almost godlike power! He's effectively **immortal!**

And I opened my mouth to inform Mike of this, but he shook his head.

"Trust me," he said. **"He's gone.** Notch, too, from what I heard. There was this large battle up north. Up there, **the Eyeless One's** minions have been bringing in all kinds of things. Even **demons**, if you can believe that. And they . . . **teleported** him somehow. He was flung far past the Void. To one of the far realms."

He lowered his head. "Anyway, I . . . **Well**, I've been trying to sell some stuff so I can afford the fare to **Valenza**. Steve was always talking about going there . . ." As he said this, Mike had this weird, absent sort of smile. **It's an island**, but they say it's Aetheria's version of **Italy**. Like how Dawnsbloom was inspired by **France**, and Novaly is a weird version of **Japan**. Some of the best pizza around in Valenza, while Novaly is said to have amazing sushi, and . . ."

Italy? France? Were those Earth kingdoms? And pizza? Sushi? Why was he talking about food at a time like this?! He just said Notch was teleported to a place that probably makes the Nether look like one of Stump's old **birthday parties**! While Steve was . . .

Was . . .

Steve, were you really . . .

No, you can't be! I refuse to believe it!

Mike's wrong! I know he is! Surely you respawned somewhere, right?!

"So you're . . . leaving," I heard Emerald say. I'd never seen her look so **glum**. "You're just . . . boarding a ship to some island."

A flash of irritation flickered across Mike's face. "I never asked to be sent here. None of us did. And after what happened to Steve, **I'm done**. Everyone else has already left for Novaly. Well, **almost** everyone. I only stayed behind because I thought I could make a

difference, but it's hopeless . . . I'm **sorry**, but it is. So I'm getting as far away from this place as I can. And so should you. Because the truth is . . ."

What he said next, with the way he looked at me, is something I'll never forget. ". . . **We failed.**"

He looked back one last time. "If you want to know why, check out **the ruins beneath the city**. Only then **you'll understand.**"

And he was out the door.

I silently watched him go. Mike . . . That wasn't him. Where was the heroism? The optimism? How could he give up? So our world had monsters, and weird weather nowadays, but was the situation really that bad?

The heroes can't fail. That just **didn't happen**, right? They're **summoned** heroes!

I drew my Academy sword and chopped at a nearby crate. With this chop came a shout, **a battle cry**, then more chops and more shouts, until the crate exploded into pixels of wood. Random weapons and pieces of armor spilled everywhere.

Seconds later, I was rolling across cobblestone. My second time getting **thrown out** of a shop. As I picked myself up, the clouds

were getting darker, and the first drops of rain were scattering across the street like little black stars.

Emerald said nothing. I was speechless myself. What were we going to do? What was anyone going to do? And what was Mike talking about earlier?

Ruins beneath the city . . .

A few days ago, I overheard some **students** talking about those ruins. I hadn't paid much attention, though. The way they spoke, it was of no importance. Some **forgotten** thing few people cared about.

The entrance was said to be at the north edge of town. That wasn't too far from my current location.

"Where are you going?!" Emerald called out. **"No way! We are not going there!"**

And she muttered something about now she had left her sense of adventure back in her room, where it was warm, dry, and not smelling of mold and . . . **"Hey! Will you wait up?! I'm out of Swiftness potions, you squid builder!"**

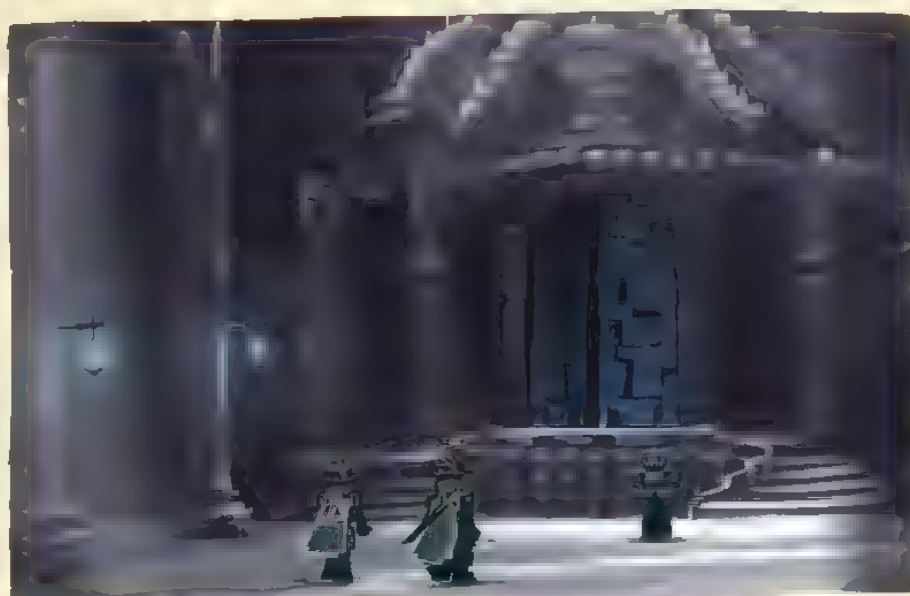
. . .

My mind nearly froze trying to imagine someone building a house out of squids. Was it possible? Could a squid be frozen in some way so as to function as an effective block?

Maybe in a different world ,
it would have been something I tried.



QUESTSDAY (MONDAY)—UPDATE III



The entrance to the Maze.

That's what they call the ruins beneath the capital—the Maze.

Its origins are **unclear**. No one knows who built it or what its original purpose was. At least, that's what Emerald was mumbling about as we stepped into the entrance chamber. I stared at the massive **metal doors** on the far end, one slightly **ajar**. The guard standing before them looked so tiny.

"So you knew about this place," I said.

Emerald gave me a flat look. "You never read **"Aetheria Geographica,"** did you?"

"Only the first chapter," I said. (That's all we were required to read at this point.) "I mean, it just went on about grass and dirt blocks."

"Well, the **third chapter** has a short entry on these ruins."

"And you didn't say anything?"

"Because I knew it would lead to this exact situation!" Emerald nipped. "Why do you always have to **snoop** around? And let me do the talking. Your skill in Speech is even worse than your Magic."

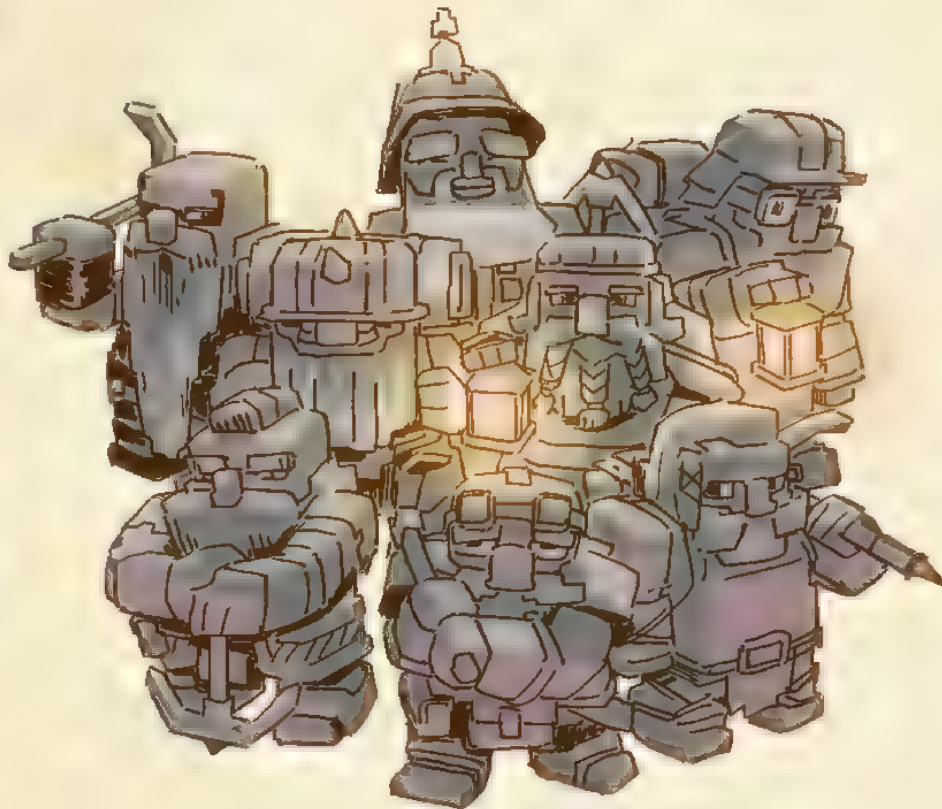
As we approached the door, I realized the guard was, in fact, a **Knight of Aetheria**, and rather young for a Knight—about Max's age. He had to have been the lowest rank among their order.

He also seemed rather confused to see us here. "**Sorry**, kids. You'll need a guild card to proceed any farther."

Guild cards. The more **prestigious** guilds provide them. Having a card like that means you're not a complete novice. There's at least one tavern in Lorica that requires a guild card to enter, and the ruins are apparently the same. No **neophytes** allowed.

I looked to Emerald. I had no idea if she had **a plan** here, and I never found out. Before either of us said a word, a large and noisy group came barreling in behind us.

... A group of dwarves.



"Blackstone Mining Company!" one of them boomed. "At your service!"

"It's **an honor** to meet you," the young Knight said. "The rest of your team has already arrived. They've been **excavating** for nearly an hour."

"You hear that, lads?" Another dwarf turned to the rest.
"Excavating, he says!" The rest all laughed.

"A fancy word!"

"Aye! A bit too fancy, I say!"

"Excavating, huh? Isn't that what the elves call it?"

"Please understand, we—as real practitioners of the art known as
"minecraft"—prefer the term **mining**!"

"Oh, **go easy** on him, boys!" One dwarf held up his pickaxe.
"I wager this lad has never even seen high-grade mithril, let alone a
team like ours!"

As this went on, Emerald and I wasted no time in **inching our
way** to the entrance. The massive doors seemed even larger up close,
ominous. Who could have made something like that?

I glanced back one last time before we crept through. The dwarves
were still **pestering** that poor guard. No one had noticed us. And
when we finally stepped in . . .

Well, I don't know what I was expecting to see, **but I'm sure it
wasn't this.**



A **vast and lonely** corridor of faint blue stone.

It wasn't sky blue or anything like that. A muted color. **Quiet.**

And the middle of the hall had these silver cauldron-looking things. **Elegant** and almost ceremonial in appearance. They looked out of place here. Like something you'd see in an elven temple.

White flames were burning within each, providing at least enough light to see.

"Are you sure this is **a good idea?**" Emerald asked.

I'll be **honest**, after seeing this place, I was asking that myself. I shrugged at her question, though. "What if **Steve** is here?"

"And what if he's . . . not?"

We were **creeping** forward, and she was looking around everywhere, **nervously**, especially the ceiling, which couldn't be seen—all shadow, a black void.

". . . This place gives me **the creeps.**"

Yeah, there was definitely something eerie about this place.

A dungeon. It was more like a dungeon. And even though it didn't look too different from the dungeon near Owl's Reach . . . I don't know. There was just something off about it. Something weird and unsettling.

I studied one of the **blue columns**. "What kind of stone is that?"

"Do I look like a stone expert?" Emerald tilted her head.

"Actually, I wonder if that's **azarite?** That's yet another stone supposedly harder than **bedrock**. I think it's the same color. But I don't see how anyone could craft blocks out of that in such . . . **vast quantity.**" She looked around again. "I really think we should get out of here."

". . . What's that?"

Up ahead, the corridor came to an end, and there was a large . . . **alcove**, I guess? Like another room, nine blocks in width, half the width of the corridor. It **led nowhere**, and there was one of those cauldron things in the center, with a white flame crackling inside.

Strangely, **the floor was different there**, no cracks or lines, like a giant slab of smooth blue stone.



I don't know why we stepped in.

We just walked in without even **saying anything**.

As soon as we did, I felt the floor **shift**, and there was the sound of stone on stone.

"Hey!" Emerald looked at me, at the walls, at me again.

Her expression was like that of a creeper at a tiger farm. **"What did you do?!"**

"Nothing, I . . ."

Then, with a deep rumbling, the surrounding walls began moving. No, **we were moving**. The floor beneath us was sinking. Only the floor. The only way out quickly rose above our reach, and shrank and shrank, until above it was only darkness.

". . . An elevator," Emerald said. **"It's an elevator!"**

One that fell **forever** down a vertical stone shaft nine blocks in width. The walls just blurred past.



I can only assume this was some kind of advanced redstone contraption. Or maybe a powerful enchantment? Max was always talking about how blocks can be enchanted. And suddenly I realized—finally—that I had rushed into this place without him, or Breeze, or Stump. I just wasn't thinking straight, **overwhelmed** and **angered** by everything I'd learned.

Steve.

What were you doing here?

What was so important about this place?

Then the rumbling stopped, the elevator had **stopped**, and behind me I heard calls and shouts, laughter and whistling, and most of all, **the sound of picks** on stone.

...

I turned around.

Imagine the **largest dungeon chamber** of all time.

It's dark and gloomy with vast stone columns rising to a ceiling so high it can't be seen.

Now imagine part of that chamber **filled with dwarves**.

A lot of dwarves. And despite the oppressive darkness that surrounds them, they're just **merrily** working away, humming, whistling, joking, hauling crates, lanterns, and blocks of TNT, and swinging picks that were, most likely, made of the highest quality **mithril**.



One dwarf was standing right next to the elevator, and he looked **rather disappointed** upon seeing us step out. He couldn't have been too much older than me, and his beard hadn't fully grown in. "Don't suppose you've seen any more of us up there?"

"Err, **yeah**, they were . . ."

Before I could finish speaking, the **rumbling** returned, and the elevator began moving back up.

"Ah." The young dwarf smiled. "**That must be them.**" He extended a hand. "**Durek Wolfhammer!** Welcome to the largest operation ever attempted by the **Blackstone Company!** We're on a mission from the king!"

A second dwarf, older, and with the longest black beard, joined Durek in staring at us. "Best head back, kids. I can see you wanted to **have a look around**, but the Maze is no place for novices."

"Look at their uniforms," a third dwarf said. Unlike the rest, he looked **scholarly**, wizardly, with spectacles and bright blue robes that were only slightly covered in dust. "They're **Academy greenhorns.**"

"Greenhorns or not," said Long Beard, "they'll only find trouble here."

Blue Robes laughed. "And **how old** were you when you first stepped inside? **Not a bat's whisker** past these two, I'll wager! As green as the finest jade!"

"A fair point," said Long Beard. "Though back then, we had no idea of this dungeon's significance. And its security measures were not in full force."

Durek nodded. "Don't wander too far. The **fourth dimensional** properties of this dungeon can be confusing for the inexperienced."

"Indeed, the **Dark One** is up to no good here," said Blue Robes. "He **used to inhabit** this dungeon long ago. A side lair of his. To think he used to conduct experiments here! Right beneath the city!"

"We think the city was originally built here for that reason," Durek said, stepping a bit closer. "To put a cork in a volcano, if you get me."

"That's only a **theory!**" snapped the scholarly dwarf. "We have no records of that day!"

The young dwarf sighed at him. "Anyway, he's been spotted around here as of late. Seems he's taken a great interest in **this location**, and . . ."



Emerald and I could only stand there as the three dwarves began talking about the **"Dark One"** at the same time:

"Some even think the **rat** may now be hiding in the lower floors, commanding his armies from afar through the use of **foul magics**."

"He and only he knows of **secret ways** inside! Hidden entrances that exist outside the city proper! In fact, we believe he knows of a **hidden elevator** that can be used to traverse this dungeon effortlessly."

"Aye, he's a **sneaky old rat!** With this being the largest rathole you could possibly imagine!"

"I'll say! We haven't even found the stairs to the second floor yet!"

"Much of this first floor hasn't even been **mapped** yet, you rockbrain!"

"Oh, we'll get to him soon enough!" a fourth dwarf said, joining the first three. "Who needs stairs, anyway? Just a bit of mining is all we need!"

"Aye! And **blasting!**" said a fifth.

A sixth: "And **drilling!**"

Long Beard grinned. "Let's hear it, lads!"

They suddenly began singing **the most cheerful song**. A dwarven mining song.

I only remember that it started with the line: *"O TNT, you'll show the way!"* . . . and later, a line about how they'll *"send that rat on his*

merry way." That's all I can remember, really. I was too focused on what they had mentioned earlier.

... **Herobrine.**

Was he really here? Right beneath the city?

He must have been. I knew Steve wouldn't have tried exploring this dungeon without a very good reason. What had he discovered? **What was Herobrine doing here?**

Soon, there was a deep rumble again. The elevator had returned. The dwarves from earlier quickly barreled out while the rest rushed to greet them, and I thought about heading back.

I could have found Breeze, told her everything. She would have talked **some sense** into me, at least.

Or I could stop depending on her for a change . . .

Upon drawing my arming sword, and taking those **first few steps**, I felt like a Knight at long last.

Emerald objected immediately. "Hey, didn't you hear them? Don't wander too far? Fourth dimensional properties? Confusing for the inexperienced?"

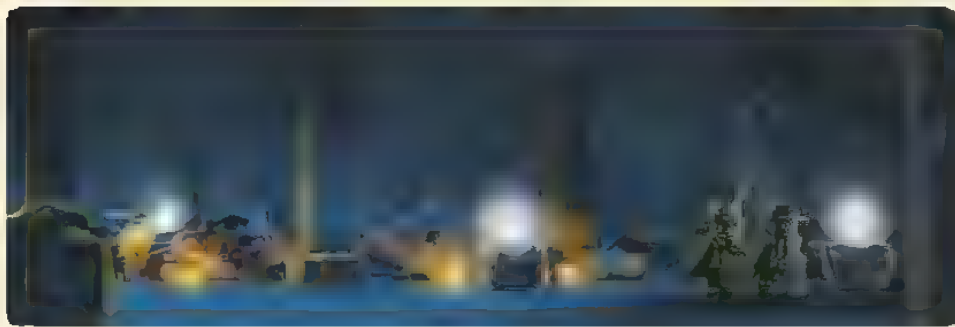
"What does that mean, anyway?"

"I have no idea, and I have **no intention** of finding out!"

"Just stay behind me," I said. **We'll be fine.** I'm not so inexperienced."

"Hmmp! I hardly think you're an expert! You've only been in one dungeon yourself!"

It goes without saying that, when I **stepped farther into the dungeon**, Emerald did, in fact, remain behind me at all times.



Spooky, huh?

All this place needed was cobwebs.

Say what you want about him, but when it comes to **evil** lairs, Herobrine is all class.

I couldn't understand, though. Why would Mike ask me to go here? What could I possibly **learn**? And I almost turned back.

That was when I heard it. Up ahead, and to the right, something was **moving**. Shuffling. Partially hidden behind one of the broken columns. A dark green form about the size of a . . .

Wait.

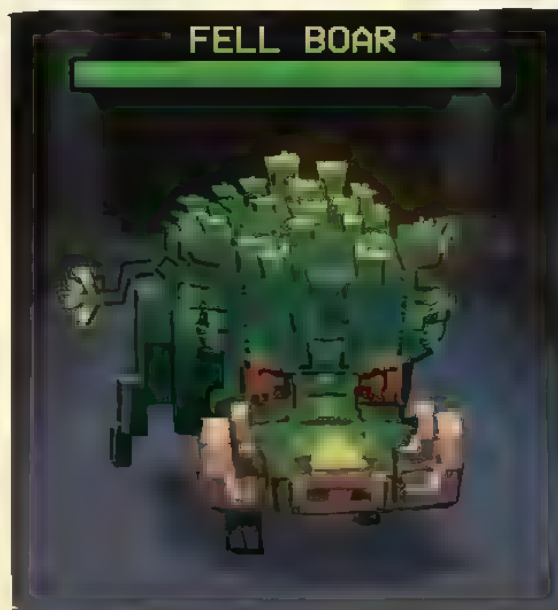
No, that . . . Is that really . . .

Despite the green hide, the shape was **unmistakable**.

I had a hard time comprehending it, but shambling in our direction, one hoof at a time . . .

Emerald more or less squeaked at the sight of it: "... I-Is . . . That **a pig?**

It did **vaguely** resemble one, with a nose four pixels wide and three pixels tall, the same as any pig. But there were a few **key differences**.



Fell.

That word implied something evil.

As one can expect, Emerald was already backpedaling. "My Analyze says it's only **level one**, but . . ."

She had managed to upgrade her Analyze the other day, to the second rank, **Analyze II**. That displays additional info on the target, from basic stats like armor and HP to its level.

Monsters have levels according to their **strength**. What we fought back in Villagetown was mostly level two to five. An enderman might be **level ten**. So this creature, at level one, should have been only slightly more threatening than a chicken.

In theory, anyway.

. . .

Emerald was still moving back. "Let's go, huh?"

"**Yeah**. We . . ." That was all I had time to say before the boar **charged** with a shriek that could have woken Stump.

How do you think I responded here? Listen, I just spent the last several weeks getting pummeled by training golems. You bet I activated Parry! By now it was **instinctual**, automatic. Had I been at the Academy and had someone jumped out from around a corner or something—you know, to scare me—I would have probably used Parry in response. That's how much this defensive move had been drilled into me.

And today, I would have made our instructors **proud!**

Up went the blade, so fast, which glowed brilliantly with golden pixels flying, the color of elemental earth, and accompanied by a shrill metallic sound—**K'SHIIN**—marking a perfectly executed Parry.

. . . It was **barely enough**.

The boar crashed into me like **a bedrock anvil**. Even with Parry, my HP dropped slightly, and I went skidding back several blocks.

" . . . The heck?!"

How was this thing **so strong?!** It was only level one!

I'd barely recovered, and the monster was already charging again. What followed was more intense than anything the training grounds had ever thrown at us.

Parry, Dash, Parry, Dash. We burned through so much mana. And healing pots, Swiftess pots. Ten mana biscuits. Strength and armor pots we had brewed in class.

Every last consumable we had.

And the few hits we landed barely did damage, almost like hitting stone. Not even when I equipped **Eventide** did the situation improve.

High armor, then.

Why was that so familiar . . . ?

As I Parried yet another strike, an image flashed through my mind.

The first time Breeze and I had fought the undead. They had been protected somehow, my sword had just **bounced off**.

It was the same thing now. We were out of potions while the monster was **still at half**. Only then did I notice the icons below its name. Those indicated beneficial magical effects, or **buffs**.

Of course.

This magic must have been **enhancing** its strength, armor and other stats. To the point where it was as strong as a **miniboss**.

Sure, a level-one monster—**That's easy**.

But imagine that same monster under the effects of every known potion. That's what we were fighting, essentially — A near **unstoppable force**.

Had this been part of a play, **ominous** boss music would have certainly appeared.

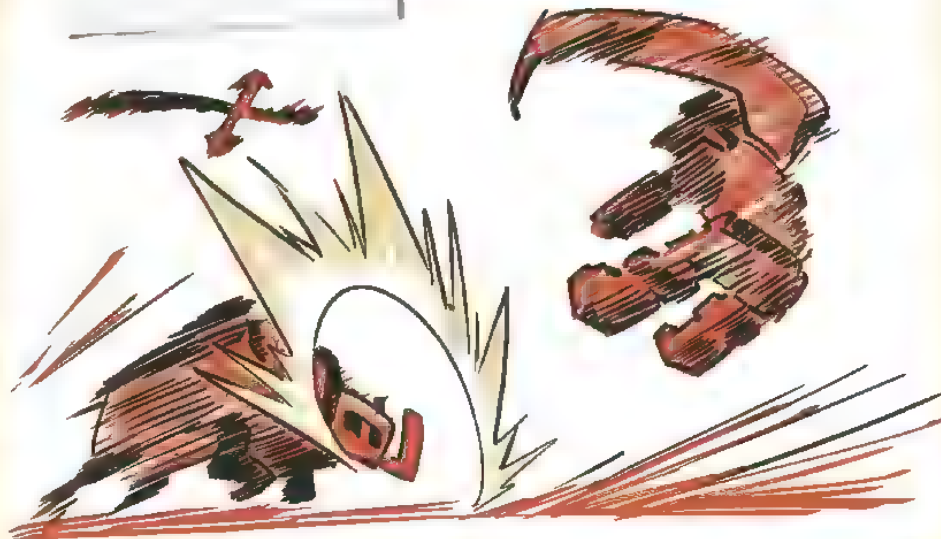


"There were times when the monster used Dash to evade an attack."

"There was even a time
when it lured me into the
columns, where it was hard
to swing a sword. Really,
how smart was that pig?"



"... I also fizzled
Parry once."



At last, I fell to the ground, **stunned**, weaponless, and at less than half HP.

With another strike, the boar would **reduce my health to zero**, and turn me into a dungeon decoration.

Meanwhile, Emerald was shouting in my ear. What was she babbling about?! It was **complete nonsense**! How about a little help?!

I only recall the last word of **her spell**: “. . . Glimra!”

And the air wavered and erupted in a **deafening** blast. Green pixels flew everywhere.

One thing I’ve learned about magic. It can be very **loud**. Something to do with the conversion of mana from its inert state. This conversion, at least with many spells, tends to produce a very loud noise, as well as intense flashes of color and other effects.

Anyway, the spell she cast right then—**Air Bolt**—was among the loudest and flashiest.

With the air around us rippling like water, the surrounding dungeon flashed emerald green, and with a deafening **“woomf”** a cylinder of transparent green light crashed into the beast.



The spell hit so hard, the boar was **driven** into a column, where it fell to the ground. In addition to bringing the boar's health to five, Emerald's spell had apparently **stunned** the animal.

I picked myself up, staring at Emerald. "Where did you learn that?"

"Max got an extra **libram**, so I asked for one, too."

"Not exactly the kind of spell **a bard** would typically learn."

She shrugged. "I thought it'd come in **handy**. And guess what? It did."

"Uh huh."

From what I knew, Air Bolt wasn't considered a basic spell. It was **strong** enough for use by the military. "So you really have **a talent** with magic."

"Aery seems to think so."

"How long does that stun last, anyway?"

"On undead things? Pretty long. **We're fine.**" She looked down at the monster. "So it had **buffs.**"

"You noticed."

One effect was called **Unholy Strength**. It enhanced the boar's strength the way a strength potion does. A second effect, **Fell Aegis** gave a high level of protection against physical damage. Finally, **Necromantic Ward** increased the boar's maximum health by thirty, **fifteen hearts**.

"With buffs like that," Emerald said, "it's more like level fifteen or twenty. You think this is what Mike meant when he said **the situation is hopeless?**"

"Maybe?"

Was it, though? **Hopeless?**

I glanced down at the boar. It had been tough, certainly. But not impossible.

However, something wasn't adding up. "All right, let's assume this is one of Herobrine's creations," I said. "What's he doing wasting so much magic on a low-level monster like that?"

Emerald frowned. "Huh. Yeah, it's almost like enchanting a wooden sword with Sharpness V. Sure, you can do it. **But why?** You'd think he'd rather invest his magic in . . . I don't know. Giant skeletons or something? **Ender dragons?**"

". . . Right."

And I almost laughed.

A bunch of level-one monsters with creepy sounding enchantments . . .

Was that all he had? Was this really Herobrine's great strategy? The crowning achievement of the so called **"Demon Lord"**? **What a joke.**

"At least we'll get some XP out of this," I said. With how strong this monster was, it would surely be **a lot**.

Training only goes so far.

By graduation, I might reach level five as a warrior. However, each level afterward will require more and more XP. Which is almost exclusively earned by defeating monsters. Why am I mentioning this

anyway? You defeat monsters and gain XP, then you train and level up. Everyone knows that.

We raised our swords.

"Say hello to **the Eyeless One** for us!!"

And our blades came down. And down again.

The last of the monster's health was not removed **without difficulty**.

With each strike, the boar flashed red and bounced across the ground slightly. *Just give me my XP already!* At last, the monster's health hit zero.

As expected, its body began dissolving into smoke. There was a familiar sound, a glaslike ring—**Experience**. A sphere of light flew into each of us. **Two spheres in total.**

Small ones.

Tiny.

Roughly about this size:

0

"... **Wuh?**" I blinked several times.

Emerald's face grew dark. "Um. How much was that?"

...

...
...
...
...
...
...

"It would appear that we each gained . . ."

" . . . One XP."

No.

I whirled around **in shock**, anger, horror, and **disbelief**.

Why was I so surprised? It was such an obvious thing! A monster provides XP based on **its level**. Everyone knows that.

The boar—being level one—had provided a grand total of 1 XP.

As much as any ordinary pig.

No, that can't be right! **One experience point?! Even a low level slime gives fifteen** or more! I'm talking a pink slime roughly the size of a block, that doesn't multiply, has 2 to 3 HP and deals a single point of damage at most! You could defeat them with a stick! Or your bare hands, if you were feeling brave! And an enderman, which isn't nearly as strong as what we just fought, gives well over **five hundred** . . .

ONE?!?!?!?!?!?!?!?!?!?!?

A SINGLE POINT?!?!?!?!?!?!?!?!?!?!?!?!?!?!?!?!?

YOU'D GET MORE MINING COAL!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

"..."

I fell to my knees.

So this is what Mike was talking about.

Hopeless. It had always been **hopeless**. Our world never had a chance.

"The zombies back in our village," I mumbled. "The ones with potion effects. **Remember them?** That must have been a trial! An experiment! That's his strategy! It's been his strategy all along! A strategy he's now perfected!"

MAGICAL EFFECTS DON'T INCREASE HOW MUCH XP A MONSTER GIVES!

IMAGINE DEFEATING AN ENDER DRAGON AND ONLY GETTING ONE EXPERIENCE POINT FROM IT!

THE SUMMONED HEROES FIGURED OUT BECAUSE THE EYELESS ONE HAS BEEN PREVENTING THEM FROM GAINING XP!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Without XP, no one would be able to gain levels! And **without levels**, no one could learn magic powerful enough to challenge him! All he had to do was make sure heroes could never properly level up, and he could run through this world **with impunity!**

You're an **evil** wizard bent on conquering the world.

A world where heroes grow stronger with each of your minions they slay.

You summon and send a giant at the capital. A level two hundred boss over thirty blocks tall. It's big, scary and also, worth 100,000 XP, no, probably more, 250,000, **a million**. Here's what happens. The heroes see that thing coming and rejoice! It's a walking XP **pinata** heading their way! You've just helped them grow stronger!

Would you, as an intelligent evil wizard, ever do such thing?
No!!! You'd send an ocean of low-level trash mobs empowered by dark spells! The only thing the heroes ever gain is a pile of salty **tears!**



Well played, Herobrine.

Well played.

You really are a Demon Lord . . .

I **collapsed** to the floor.

"Wow, hey, y-you're at negative two MP!" I heard Emerald say.

It appeared I'd pushed my mana well below zero during that battle.

Adrenaline, perhaps. "How were you still standing?! Here! **Eat!**"

Emerald gave me the last of our mana biscuits. One I had dropped on the dungeon floor during battle. It did have a few pixels of dust clinging to it, and one greenish pixel that appeared to be dungeon slime, but I still ate it, hoping it would be enough to raise my mana from the negatives.

It **wasn't enough**.

As my consciousness slipped away, my vision **grew dim**. Yet the current state of our world had never been more clear.

Today, I learned why summoned heroes were leaving the kingdom in droves. And why an Academy was so desperate to train even commoners like me.

Aetheria, our innocent little world made of pixels and blocks, was . . .

KINGSDAY (TUESDAY)

Don't worry. I'm fine.

One of the dwarves showed up soon after I passed out and hauled me back to the Academy like **a sack of beetroots**.

It's weird because I don't remember yesterday. I was **out** the entire day. Running out of mana is bad, but pushing yourself into the negatives like that . . .

Actually, it wasn't so bad at all, because **I won't have class** for the next few days. Aery wants me to rest up. And yean, my friends couldn't believe what Emerald and I had discovered. Herobrine's **nefarious** little scheme.

"First he disrupts the king's summoning spell," Max said. "And now, to deprive the world's heroes of their hard-earned XP . . . That's **so unfair**. I suppose the kingdom will need to come up with **an effective counter strategy**."

"What other sources of experience are there?" Ophelia said. "Mining? Crafting? That won't offer any significant amount."

Stump offered **a pretty good** solution: "What about the dungeon near **Owl's Reach**? The monsters there give decent XP, and they reset every week, right? So couldn't people go there and, you know, start farming it for experience?"

Max grinned. "Weekly XP runs, eh? **I like the sound of that.**"

"That dungeon is pretty far away, though," Breeze said. "Maybe we could find one similar that's a bit closer to the capital?"

"What about Steve?" Lola said. "And Mike?"

"Well, if Mike really took off to some island," Ophelia said, "we'll have to head there and convince him to come back. As for Steve, I don't know. Could he really be . . ."

Stump shook his head. **"No way.** We've all seen Steve in action. There's just no way anything could get him." He looked at me expectingly. **"Right?"**

"Well, yeah. I'm sure he's **still alive.** The thing is, he told me once that when he respawned, he reappeared pretty far from his original location. He could be anywhere."

"Hey!" Emerald nearly leapt out of her chair. **"I have an idea.** I heard about a spell that can be used to locate people. Even someone on the other side of the world."

"I bet that's a high-level spell," Stump said. "Who's going to cast it? **You?**" He stifled a laugh.

"Idiot! I was obviously talking about hiring someone! And I'm not so bad with spells, you know!"

He shrugged. "I guess we could **look for someone,** but I'm sure that kind of service isn't exactly cheap."

"Maybe we can all start fishing," Max said. "There's this place called the **Auction House** where you can put pretty much anything up

for sale. We can fish and put it all up on the Auction House. Every last emerald we earn from this venture goes into the **Steve Rescue Fund**. How about that?"

Hearing his **ridiculous** plan, I couldn't help but grin.

Steve, don't worry, we will find you somenow. And I swear, if we find that you're just lounging around somewhere, eating pizza all day . . .

You're going to wish you had never
met this simple villager

named Runt!

KINGSDAY (TUESDAY) —UPDATE II



Breeze dragged me to **the beach** later on.

She said I'd had enough adventuring for now. And made me promise never to set foot into another dungeon—**without her**, anyway.

"No way would I go back there without you," I said. "You have no idea how **creepy** that place is." I showed her my journal. Some of the drawings I made yesterday.

The elf raised an eyebrow. "What's with **the dwarves?**"

"They're trying to mine their way to the lower floors. The king hired them."

"That stone could be **azarite**," she said. "It could take weeks to mine through a single block."

"Well, they're trying."

"I don't envy them. The thought of being so far underground . . ."

"It's not for me, either." I looked out at the sea. Although it was somewhat cloudy, the sun was there. Before us stretched a glittering blue expanse.

We did try a bit of fishing, too.

Lola made this fishing pole yesterday. **A redstone fishing pole.**

It somehow increases your Fishing skill by fifteen. It should come in quite handy with Max's fishing idea.

By the way, there's one thing I don't get about Breeze. She grew up near the ocean, and she belongs to a race of **seafaring elves**. So you would think she would have a high Fishing skill. It's **worse** than mine, though. At the same time, she can swim like a fish—literally. When we swam out to some rocks, looking for a better fishing spot, I had to chug a Swiftmess potion! Her Swimming skill has to be in the low 200s!



Sadly, even with Lola's new fishing pole, we didn't catch anything worthwhile.

"By the way," Breeze said, as I sent out my line again. "Did you hear about **Cog** and his crew?"

"Strangely, **no**. I didn't. I didn't hear anything from either Stump or Emerald, and that's . . . **strange**."

Usually Stump updates me on the smallest things. He must be so **exhausted** from his extra training, he just forgot.

"What happened?"

"They all **dropped out** yesterday evening. Guess Cog got thrashed in the training grounds pretty bad. He ragequit, then Pebble ragequit, and finally, all the rest. Supposedly, they're going to join the **Thieves Guild**."

". . . I'm not **surprised**. And honestly, after what they did back in the village, I don't even want to talk about them."

"Yeah. I'm sure we'll see them around," She paused. "I'm starving. We could go to that one restaurant."

"You mean the one Stump was talking about? With the wizard-chefs and the **magical cooking**?"

"Yep. Just us. **Why not?**"

The two of us? Why would she suggest a thing like that?

"Why not bring the **whole team?**" I asked. "We need to discuss selling strategies. We could check out the Auction House later on. We also need to go over things like stats, enchantments. At least, I know my gear could use some enchanting. I need to optimize my stats for **better overall DPS**."

“. . . Err.” A long pause. “All right, let’s bring everyone. One condition, though. We dress up for the occasion.”

Dress up?

I can do a **fancy** outfit.

Sadly, Breeze didn’t seem too happy with my choice of attire.

What was her problem? She asked me to dress up, didn’t she?

I arrived at that restaurant in the **PERFECT** outfit! Yet all she could do was frown!



Moments before I arrived, I’d even bought **a new shield** at a nearby shop.

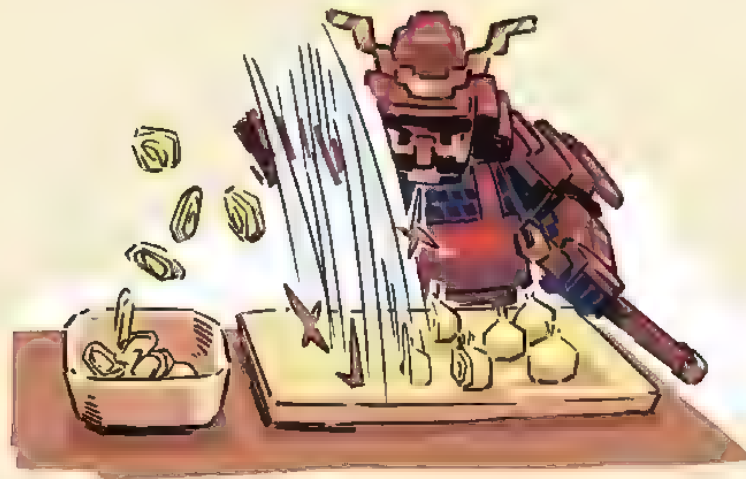
It was on sale, **used**. It had a few dings and fang marks. My black armor was pretty beat up as well. I hadn't done too many **repairs** on the hauberk yet. It was a little tattered.

So what? She really wants to criticize **MY** fashion sense while wearing **THAT** ridiculous gown?

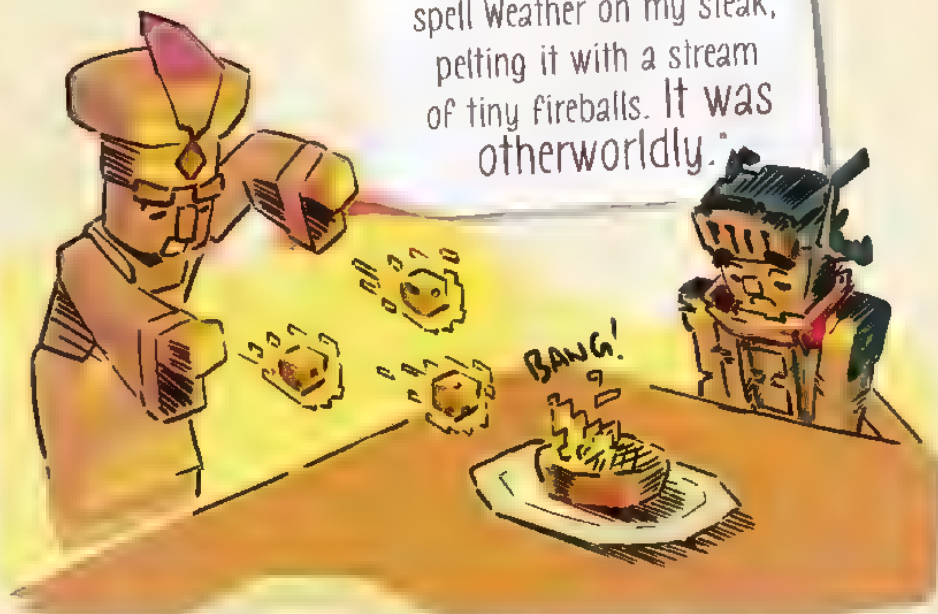
Sometimes I can't understand her at all . . .

At least dinner went well. One of the chefs was a **Novalian** (from Novaly) and **fifteenth-level samurai**.

Wielding an appropriate sword, he used this ability called **Blade Frenzy**. This increased his attack speed by something like **500%**. You wouldn't believe how fast this man could slice through onions.



"A mage also used the spell Weather on my steak, pelting it with a stream of tiny fireballs. It was otherworldly."



"Despite multiple warnings from our waitress, Stump ordered a dish called Lavabreath Chili. Truly a perfect night!"





Breeze also said she's been struggling lately. That extra training of hers has been **pretty grueling**.

It mostly focuses on a style of **elven swordsmanship**.

Weirdly, it incorporates the use of a cloak. A special elven cloak made of **spider silk**. That material is durable enough by itself, but combined with the right enchantments, it's like a layer of **flowing steel**.

"The elven scouts of old were all trained in this fighting style," Breeze said. "Many didn't even wear armor."

"**Wow . . .**" I was sad to see she wasn't wearing her special cloak now. Maybe tomorrow I'd get to see it. "A cloak can really offer that much **protection**, huh? Almost sounds like something a **rogue** might learn. Wait. That's what you're going to become, **isn't it? A rogue!**"

Breeze flashed a **sheepish** grin. "Yep. In fact, my instructors say I might reach first level in a week or so."

"**A week?!**" I quickly composed myself. "You'll be the first of us to learn **a class**, then. I'm not surprised. **And rogue . . .** No surprise there, either."

Breeze the elven rogue.

I saw that one coming a thousand blocks away. For someone like Breeze, was there any other choice?

A rogue focuses on **stealth** above all other forms of magic. When it comes to **ambushing** an opponent, and **slipping** through enemy ranks unseen, a rogue is without peer.

Rogues also have access to higher ranks of movement abilities, like Air Dash, Sprint, and Leap. So the class really is a **perfect** match for her.

"You were even sneaking around the first time we met," I said. "So I can't imagine you as anything else."

Breeze made a slight laugh. "I suppose it does suit me. Although, would you believe two members of the elven council wanted me to become a **Priestess of Alune** instead?"

"**A moon priest?** They wear white robes, don't they? I definitely can't imagine that. I'm trying to, but you in all white? There's just **no way.**"

KINGSDAY (TUESDAY) —UPDATE III

Things got **weird** when we returned to the Academy.

It started off simple enough. At the front desk, Aery called me in for a meeting. However, it wasn't her office she took me to, but one far more **grand and luxurious**.

An office that held . . .



Her.

A girl with **silvery** hair.

She looked around my age or a bit younger.

Her robes were silvery as well, and fancy, like what a noble might wear.

"Hiiiiiiii!" With a smile as radiant as any spell, she shuffled forward in a pair of silver slippers. "Ever since I saw you in that trial," she said, "I just had to **meet** you! That golem battle was **SO amazing!** I've never seen anything like it!"

Now that she mentioned it, I recalled seeing her at the training grounds on the **day of the trial.**

She had been observing us from a distance. I hadn't paid very much attention to her then. At that point in time, I was far more concerned with an angry golem who kept trying to introduce my face to its fist.

...

I stared at her, unsure of what to say.

She seemed just as uncertain. "Um, **okay**, so first, I'd like to say, **welcome** to the school! I really did mean to **give everyone a big welcome** on that first day, a little speech, but . . ."

What's she talking about?

A big welcome? Speaking to the students?

How can she possibly work here?! She has to be younger than me!

For some reason, when I thought this, **she blushed.**

“Forgive me. You have no idea who I am.” Another smile, slightly nervous. “I’m **Elodi.**”

It was a beautiful sounding name, almost like “melody” without the “m.” She seemed reluctant to add: “. . . **The King of Ardenvell.**”

...

Huh? What’s that?

The girl standing before me, barely reaching my shoulder, is . . .

??

??????????????

. . . **THE KING?!?!?!?**

I was so **bewildered** by her statement, so confrazzled, well, she could have claimed to be a pinecone waffle and it would have made more sense!

Wait.

Is my panicking justified?

Kings are normally male, aren’t they? They are, right?!

I didn’t even know for sure! How could I?! Until today, my knowledge of **royalty** was limited to what little I’d gleaned from books like *The Adventures of Captain Blockbeard.*

A fairy tale series for young children.

In those books, everyone referred to royalty as **"Your Awesomeness"** . . . There was also a purple enderman who wore yellow boots . . . It probably wasn't the most reliable source of real-world information.

Then my mind started functioning again. Come on, I'm a student at the best school in Aetheria! Of course I learned about the king! One of our textbooks had an entire chapter on him!

That's right—**Him!**

King Runehammer II. A tall, middle-aged guy with silvery hair, and . . . Um . . . Didn't he have a dog?

All right, so that was all I knew about him. I **hadn't read much**. Luckily, that book also had several full-color illustrations of the guy. Let's just say those drawings, and the girl standing before me, didn't exactly match.

"I don't understand," I finally managed to say. "I thought the king had . . ." I gestured to suggest **a mustache**.

"Yeah." Her smile **fell**. "That's my father. He, **um** . . . fell ill two months ago. **Not too many know** about that yet. The council says it would cause a great deal of unrest. Especially with what's been happening lately. And you could say I'm not really the king. There are people making many of my decisions for me. **The council.** Until I turn a few years older. Hopefully my father will get better long before then."

"I'm **sorry** to hear about that, Your . . ."

I almost said "**Awesomeness**," I really was that nervous. You try speaking to a king!

"**Elodi**." The smile returned. **Somewhat**. "So I hear you went into the **labyrinth**. You and Emerald really defeated a boar? **So cool**."

"She did most of the work."

"No. . . You **defended** her several times. That's really impressive for a first rank. The labyrinth's monsters are very **tough**." She had a **wistful** look all of a sudden. "You know, that's something I've always dreamed about. To go on quests and explore the unknown."

A real adventure."

She stabbed the air with an imaginary sword. "They say monster hunting and dungeon crawling used to be seen as the kingdom's two greatest sports. Those times must have been **incredible** . . . Maybe after my father recovers, I'll have more free time, and **you and I can hit the open road!**"

"Um, yeah, I . . ."

What is she even talking about?

I doubt this girl even knows a single ability . . .

She looked rather **annoyed**. "I do, in fact, know a few."

Huh? How did she know was I was thinking? It's almost like she . . .

"Read your mind? It's called **Mindread**. A spell anyone in my position is required to learn."

"So you can . . . cast spells."

"I happen to be a **sixth-level oracle**."

An oracle? Yeah, right. I stared at her and thought: Nineteen thousand, eight hundred and twenty one. "What number am I . . ."

"The same number as your current experience total."

"**Wow.**"

She really was an **oracle** then.

That's a type of magician who specializes in **informational** magic.

They can read minds, communicate telepathically, and sense illusions and magical stealth. Some can even see into the **near future**.

I guess it makes a lot of sense for her to know such magic. She likely has to interact with a countless number of people, and it would be useful for her to know who doesn't have the kingdom's best interests at heart.

She'd also know when an assassin is about to sneak up on her.

How cool is that?

"It is a **useful** class," she said. "All of the Academy's advisors have at least a few levels in oracle as well. Some of the instructors, too."

So some of our instructors can read minds . . .

That explains SO MUCH. Like why our Abilities I instructor kept calling on me. No matter what, she always knew when I wasn't paying attention.

I looked down at the table.

What did I say now? It was so weird talking to **an actual king**.

And isn't there something I should be asking her about? Why do I keep thinking about a castle?

Wait. Aery once said, the summoned heroes were supposedly working with the king. Which means Elodi should know something about them.

Of course, being able to read my mind, Elodi replied before I could open my mouth.

"Ah. **Them.**" She seemed annoyed. "It was my father's idea to **summon** them. I never met too many. What I can tell you is that many of them no longer want to fight. And even before things got bad, there were some who said they wanted no part in this war. Said we **kidnapped** them. Kidnapped! It's a real **mess**. You used to even find them begging for food in the street . . . A while ago. I guess most are in **Novaly** by now. There are still a few around, and we may try diplomacy to get some of them back on our side, but . . . we've mostly **given up** on them." She sighed. "I can go over all that in detail with you later, if you like. But first, I **must mention** . . . I acquired this old manor a while back."

"Manor?"

"A really big house. To serve as a guildhall for **my new guild.**"
She paused. **"Wanna join?"**

A guild.

Breeze had mentioned wanting to join one.

But what about **MY** dreams? Of becoming a **Knight of Aetheria?** A real hero?

"You really wouldn't want to become a **Knight,**" she said. "You do know they have to wake up before sunrise, don't you?"

Once more, she had read my mind.

I gave her an **uneasy** look. "Can you . . . **not do that?**"

"Why not? **It's fun!**" She laughed. "Also, I will mention that my guild has some of the best food in the city. Doesn't matter if you're into dwarven cuisine or fae cuisine, we've got it all. Even if you were a lizardman from the isles of Nogbazuun, you would be well accommodated."

Yeah, she really knew how to lure me in, didn't she?

She cast out her line and here I was, already taking the bait.

"What's this guild about?"

It's here she began reeling me in.

"There are only **three rules** in my guild," she said. **"One,** you must be able to **mine** a stone block with your bare hands. A bit rough, but I'm sure you can manage. **Two,** you must be able to

chug ten Aetherianos in a row. The capital's finest enchanted coffee, with a lot of cocoa and extra whiskpuff, which is like whipped cream, an elven variety. I'm sure you'll love it."

"... And **three?**"

"**Three**, you must be willing to go on an endless number of adventures by taking on quests!"

She then explained how the guild she had established was meant to serve as a way to **unite** ... those like me. **Normal** folk from this world who, despite lacking the skill of otherworldly heroes, still possessed some measure of **magical talent**, and had come to Aetneria's aid in her darkest hour.

... Those who might **call themselves adventurers**.

Adventurers who were—until now—a **scattered** lot without any real organization or leadership.

For this reason, the name of this guild was what you might expect.

"**The Adventurer's Guild,**" Elodi said. "The guild that will become known throughout Aetheria for shutting down the Demon Lord once and for all! Or Herobrine, as you prefer." She looked at me **expectingly**. "Well? What do you think?"

"... Does your guild have **a quest board?**"

"The largest quest board of all time," she said, amused. "We also have **a map**. A **massive** one. It takes up an entire room.

We've been compiling **a map of the labyrinth**, one expedition at a time. Herobrine may be clever, but I am certain we will reach his inner lair."

She didn't have to say more.

Quest boards. At the mere thought of such a board—"Do I need to **sign** somewhere, or . . . ?"

"Not yet." She gave me a fancy-looking **golden envelope**. It contained a piece of golden parchment with words scrawled out of obsidian.

A letter of invitation.

According to its directions, the guildhall was located in the north of the city.

"You'll want to take that to the front desk. I plan on being there tomorrow. If not, someone will help you through registration." Another smile. "You will be required to begin what we call an **Adventurer's Journal**. You should have no problem with that. And our members have unique **call signs**. Nicknames. From now on, you shall be known within my guild as . . . **Rando.**"

". . . Rando."

It's almost as **ridiculous** as Runt . . .

I was already thinking about changing my name, but I'd hoped on something more . . . **cool sounding** . . .

"You don't like it?" She raised an eyebrow. "It happens to be the most common male name in Lorica. It should help you **blend in** around here. But if you really insist on keeping Runt . . . which sounds far more ridiculous, in my opinion . . .that's **your call.**"

Well, I could have told her how Runt was more of a nickname, too. And that a lot of boys from my village took on such names from a young age based on a unique feature, aspect, or **accomplishment**, until their real names were all but forgotten.

What would be the point of explaining, though? She already knew. I'd just thought about it.

And there was that smile again. "I hope to see you soon. You will, of course, continue with **your training** as needed. Here in the Academy, I mean. A few classes here and there. Not too much. As for **your friends**, I'll slip them a guild invite, too. Once I feel they're ready."

...

I left the office **speechless**.

Aery was standing there in the hall, waiting for me. "So? How'd it go?"

"... I'm going to become **an adventurer?**"

"Only if you decide to. She thinks you have a lot of **potential**. If you do sign on, you'll have someone with more experience who can show you the ropes. A seasoned veteran. Plus, you'll likely have me as an advisor. **Great, right?**"

"What, you're going to work there, too?"

Aery nodded. "I start in **two days**. The guild is short on questmasters, so Elodi offered a rather large bump in pay. I couldn't say no. You wouldn't believe **how high the rents are** in this city . . ."

When I returned to the front lobby, my friends were still there, and they grew **wordless** upon reading that letter. More so when I told them about who I'd just met.

". . . I need some fresh air," I told them. We all went for a walk outside.

"A king who is a girl," Max mumbled. "**A girl-king**. That's just weird. Why not **queen?** They really don't have . . ."

"**Who cares?!**" Stump said. "He just got into what sounds like one of the best guilds in the city! **He's in!** And that means **we'll soon be in**, too!" He took a bite of an enchanted muffin he'd been holding. We had grabbed several from that restaurant earlier. They're **otherworldly**, too.

"Yeah . . ." I looked at him, at Breeze. At all of my friends.

"We're . . . going to become **adventurers**." Then I took a bite of my own muffin and shouted: **"MH'RE MOIHM GM00 MJHOIN A MULD!!"**

In my excitement, I was frantically shouting with my mouth full. Crumbs went flying. I didn't care.

Stump didn't care, either. Upon giving me the biggest hug, he jumped for joy with his arms in the air and began spraying crumbs: **"A MULD! MHIS IS THE BEGH MGEWS I MGEVA HMEARDGG . . . !!"**

"MWE WMLL MGHO ON QMUESTS!" I shouted back. **"MWE WMLL MGHO ON MDJVENTMURES . . . !!"**

With another bite, Stump just kept shouting: **"MRE'RE MGOING TO BECOME MDFBTAHGBHHGERS . . . MHIS MS HO MG00L . . . !! GJMGJW MHGRG MGMWNGKW GLRGURG . . ."**

"Are they all right?" I heard Lola ask.

Emerald made the biggest sigh of her life. "Seriously? Is this really happening? I really, really need to learn that **Silence** spell."

And I hugged Breeze—who had started laughing at the two of us, her first real laugh in a long while—and looked to the sky. The stars tonight had never been so green.

"MRWE WMULL RESKMU SMEEVE . . . ANG MFINDG
GHMIKE . . . ANG MEFEAT MMEEROBMMRINE . . .
DEMOM LORG . . . WHAMGRVER GMU MWNT TO MCALL
MHIM . . . AH MRUV MR00, AETHERIA . . . !!"



SPECIAL THANKS

It's been forever since my last book, I know! I was dealing with writer's block. I've been working on this book since 2018 It took me a long time to build this world and decide where I wanted to take this story. But I got through it. I have everything mapped out and I'm already halfway through book eight!

And yes, I'll get better at posting updates to my socials. (A bunch of you sent me emails about this.)

Follow me on Instagram for sneak peeks of forthcoming books and concept art: **@cubekid**

There's also a fan-created Aetherian wiki page that has a lot of information about the world of Aetheria at aetherian.fandom.com. Huge thanks to all the readers who've contributed to this wiki, especially LUN, who oversaw almost everything.

That's all for now. As always, thank you for your support!

—Cube Kid

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cube Kid is the pen name of Erik Gunnar Taylor, a 41-year-old writer who lives in Alaska. He's a big fan of video games—especially Minecraft—and he discovered a passion for writing fan fiction early on.

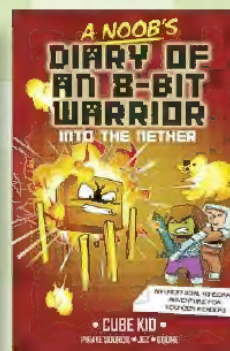
Cube Kid's unofficial Minecraft fan-fiction series, *Diary of a Wimpy Villager*, first came out as e-books in 2015 and was an immediate hit in the Minecraft community.

This series was discovered by 404 Éditions and published in France in 2016 as paperbacks with illustrations by Saboten. The illustrated series has since returned to Cube Kid's native country under the title *Diary of an 8-Bit Warrior*.

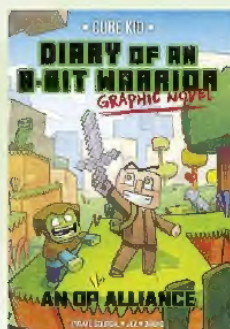
When he's not writing, Cube Kid likes to travel, putter with his car, devour fan fiction, and play his favorite video game.

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